The Treatise Committee for Brian James Watson certifies that this is the approved version of the following treatise:

Wagner's Heldentenors: Uncovering the Myths

Committee:

K. M. Knittel, Supervisor

William Lewis, Co-Supervisor

Rose A. Taylor

Michael C. Tusa

John Weinstock

Darlene Wiley

Wagner's Heldentenors: Uncovering the Myths

by

Brian James Watson, B.A., M.M.

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Wagner's Heldentenors: Uncovering the Myths

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Brian James Watson, D.M.A.

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Supervisors: K.M. Knittel

William Lewis

Although much is known about Richard Wagner himself, the Wagnerian tenor, otherwise known as the Heldentenor, is probably the least understood type of singer in opera. This lack of understanding has led to the creation of three myths: one, that Heldentenor roles are practically impossible to sing, primarily because of their length, their lack of lyrical melody, and their complex orchestral accompaniment; two, the Heldentenor is really a baritone/tenor hybrid; and three, Heldentenors are extremely rare, perhaps even extinct. While each myth contains some truth, together they present an inaccurate view of the Heldentenor.

Wagner never intended to write tenor roles that were "unsingable," nor did he want a singer who was equal parts baritone and tenor. His goal was to create a type of tenor that was uniquely German, as opposed to the French or Italian styles. Wagner

thought those styles, which placed emphasis on technical virtuosity, were incompatible with a German singer's nature. The result of Wagner's efforts over the entire course of his career was a new type of singer, the Heldentenor.

Analyses of Heldentenor roles reveal that Wagner does have his tenors sing for long periods of time: not just over the course of the whole opera, but also within certain scenes or acts. In later operas such as *Tristan und Isolde* and *Siegfried*, the Heldentenor does not have the luxury of singing in ensembles, supported by other characters. Also, Heldentenors do sing a slightly lower vocal range than other, more traditional tenor roles. The study of the careers of Wagner's first Heldentenors - Joseph Tichatschek, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, and Albert Niemann – shows that each of these singers had strengths that Wagner valued. He wanted his tenors to be good singers, capable musicians, solid actors, and sensitive artists.

Through careful study of Wagner's tenor roles, a more complete understanding of Heldentenors can be achieved. Perhaps singers will no longer hesitate to perform these roles and voice teachers will not shy away from assigning this music to their students. While Heldentenor roles are long and challenging, they are not impossible to sing.

Table of Contents

Introduction

According to Martin Van Amerongen, "After Jesus Christ and Napoleon, Wagner is one of the most written about figures in history."[1] While it is difficult to confirm the veracity of that statement, one cannot dispute the prominent position that Richard Wagner has in the history of opera and art music. Bryan Magee even claims that Wagner's influence extends far beyond mere music: "Wagner has had a greater influence than any other single artist on the culture of our age."[2] Within the course of his life, Wagner changed the nature of opera, transforming it into a comprehensive art form that placed equal emphasis on singing, acting, and the orchestra; he abandoned the conventional structure of opera, replacing separate numbers such as recitatives, arias, duets, and choruses with through-composed music drama; he expanded the role of the orchestra, allowing it to be far more than accompaniment; he created opera roles that demanded new types of singers; and he even invented new theatrical practices such as the darkening of the auditorium during a performance. Philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and writers such as James Joyce were also influenced by the art and ideas of Wagner.

Even if exaggerated, Van Amerongen's statement is not improbable; a copious amount of literature has been devoted to Wagner. What is surprising is that a relatively small amount of this literature concerns the singers who perform his music and the type of singing that this music requires. One could argue that the most important singers in

[1] Martin Van Amerongen, *Wagner: A Case History*, trans. Stewart Spencer and Dominic Cakebread (London: J. M. Dent & Sons: 1983): 6.
[2] Bryan Magee, *Aspects of Wagner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, rev. 1988): 56.

Wagner's works are tenors. One need not look beyond the titles of his works to understand the importance of tenors: *Rienzi*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Siegfried*, and *Parsifal* are all named for their central characters, all of which are assigned to the tenor voice. Though tenors play such prominent roles in Wagner's music dramas, the Wagnerian tenor is often the least understood type of singer in opera.

The Wagnerian tenor is known as the Heldentenor, the German term for "heroic tenor," a term that Wagner himself did not use when discussing his tenors. Heldentenor roles are commonly understood to be the most difficult in all of opera, particularly because of the grueling demands they place on singers. Conventional wisdom states that these roles are almost impossible to sing and only those tenors with the greatest stamina and the loudest voices can perform them. These roles are considered so difficult – and the singers capable of performing them so rare – that many singers avoid them and many voice teachers do not dare assign this music to their students. Music critics and historians also do not study the vocal demands of these roles, and therefore often repeat the many myths that have arisen concerning Heldentenors. The lack of serious scholarship devoted to these roles seems to be a glaring hole in Wagnerian literature.

My intent in writing this treatise is to replace myth with knowledge, in order to create a more accurate and informed understanding of these roles. My primary concern lies in the vocal demands: while one could study the tenor character's place in Wagner's works from a dramaturgical standpoint, such a study is best done elsewhere and will not be provided in these pages. I will also not write about many other aspects of Richard Wagner and his music, such as his use of leitmotifs or his anti-Semitism, nor do I intend

to delve into his philosophy, his psychology, or much of his personal life. Discussions of those aspects of Wagner can be found in abundance in many other places.[3]

The three major myths regarding Heldentenors will be presented in Chapter One. The first myth asserts that Heldentenor roles are anti-vocal and nearly impossible to sing; the second myth claims that a Heldentenor is really equal parts baritone and tenor; and the third myth states that Heldentenors are on the verge of extinction. While there is some truth behind these myths, the myths themselves do not give us a true understanding of Heldentenor singing. To gain a more complete and more accurate picture of the Heldentenor, one must go beyond these myths.

Chapter Two examines Wagner's development of the Heldentenor, from his early Italian- and French-influenced operas to his mature works, which were written in a style he believed to be appropriate to the German spirit (and to the German singer's abilities). Wagner did not plan on creating a type of operatic role that was impossible to sing; he only wanted to create a type of tenor singing that was different from the kind found in Italian and French operas. That new type of tenor singing is examined more closely in Chapter Three, in which the leading tenor roles from Wagner's operas, beginning with *Rienzi* and concluding with *Parsifal*, are analyzed. By analyzing these roles, I hope to provide some specific ways in which the difficulties of these roles can be discussed. Such specifics include the length, vocal range, and number of high and low notes of each

[3] Two books that address many of the above aspects of Wagner's life and career are Marc Weiner's *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) and Bryan Magee's *The Tristan Chord* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000). Weiner addresses Wagner's infamous anti-Semitism and in doing so examines many of the ideas that shaped Wagner's works. Magee's very engaging book examines Wagner's philosophical ideas, including the influence that Arthur Schopenhauer had on Wagner, and the influence that Wagner had on Nietzsche.

role. Other, more subjective aspects of each role, such as tessitura, are also discussed. This analysis should, in itself, erase many of the myths concerning Heldentenor roles.

While Chapters Two and Three show, respectively, why and how Wagner created a new voice type, Chapter Four shows how those Heldentenor roles were first performed by taking a look at the tenors with whom Wagner worked. The three most prominent Heldentenors in Wagner's time were Joseph Tichatschek, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, and Albert Niemann. Wagner's reactions to each tenor's strengths and weaknesses further reveal how he wanted these roles to be performed. The careers of these tenors also give us some historical insight into Heldentenor singing.

In conclusion, it is my hope that this study will replace Heldentenor myths with knowledge. Although Heldentenor roles are difficult to sing, they are challenging primarily because of length, not because of lack of melody or an overpowering orchestra. Accurately identifying the most taxing aspects of these roles is one step in attaining better Wagnerian performance; preparing to meet these challenges is yet another step. Hopefully, this treatise will encourage more singers and voice teachers to study these roles without trepidation, so that future generations of Heldentenors will be equipped to sing Wagner's challenging scores.

Chapter One: Heldentenor Myth

Defining a Heldentenor

Imagine reading the following advertisement:

> Audition for tenor. Must have large, ringing voice with a dark vocal timbre not unlike that of a baritone; excellent musical skills; superior memory; fluency in German; a physique appropriate for wielding swords and slaying dragons; excellent acting ability. Must also have the ability to learn, memorize, and perform harmonically and rhythmically complex music; stamina to sing an hour's worth of music over the course of an evening; outstanding diction in order to declaim text with the utmost sensitivity to the poetry; natural, realistic acting; a voice that can carry over a dense orchestra. In addition, should have an appreciation of the arts and the intellectual capacity to understand philosophy.

Obviously, there has never been a perfect *Heldentenor*, a singer who has met all of the above requirements. While the demands listed above seem unreasonable, these qualities are often expected of a Heldentenor, those tenors who primarily sing Wagner. If singers cannot meet all of those requirements, one must wonder if the expectations are too high.

Quite simply, the German term means, "heroic tenor." Yet if one thinks of all the operatic tenor roles that fall into the broad category of "hero," there would be an abundance of Heldentenor roles. Mozart's Tamino, from *Die Zauberflöte*, is a hero, as is Pollione, from Bellini's *Norma*. Cavaradossi, from Puccini's *Tosca*, is also a hero, yet not one of these roles technically falls into the Heldentenor category.

"Heldentenor" must have a more specific meaning than any tenor who happens to be a hero. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* characterizes the Heldentenor as "a dramatic tenor voice of clarion timbre and unusual endurance, closely

tied to such Wagnerian tenor roles as Tannhäuser, Tristan, Siegmund and Siegfried."[1] From this definition, one can gather that the Heldentenor sings primarily Wagnerian roles such as those mentioned above.[2] One can also understand that the Heldentenor has a voice that is ringing, or a voice that can project, and he has uncommon strength in order to sing long roles. There must be more to the heroic tenor.

The New Grove Dictionary of Opera reveals another facet of the Heldentenor with this definition: "German term, meaning 'heroic tenor'. It is now virtually inseparable from the Wagnerian repertory: the successful singer of Tannhäuser, Tristan and Siegfried is counted a *Heldentenor* almost by definition. The type is also a rarity, and when an able specimen appears he is likely to find himself so much in demand for these strenuous tenor roles in Wagner that he is effectively monopolized by them."[3] Again, emphasis is placed on singing Wagner, but now the rarity of the Heldentenor is brought to the fore.

Shirlee Emmons provides the following definition of a Heldentenor in *Tristanissimo*, her biography of the great Danish Heldentenor, Lauritz Melchior:

> The *Heldentenor Fach* demands a tenor voice of large size, exceptional stamina, and more strength in the lower register than other tenors can summon. This voice often evolves, with maturity, from a high baritone voice. Indeed, it could be characterized as a tenor/baritone. Wagner wrote his tenor roles almost exclusively for this voice, but there are roles

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[1] Owen Jander, Ellen T. Harris, "Heldentenor," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 26 vols., ed. S. Sadie and J. Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), 11: 336.

[2] In this treatise the term *Heldentenor* will be used interchangeably with *Wagnerian tenor*. Though the Heldentenor *Fach*, or vocal category, encompasses non-Wagnerian roles, such as Verdi's Otello, the present study will focus only on the Wagnerian tenor roles. The term Heldentenor will be capitalized so that it appears here as it does in German, in which all nouns are capitalized.

[3] J. B. Steane, "Heldentenor," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, 4 vols., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1992), 2: 689.

> in other operas that demand such skills: Beethoven's Florestan (*Fidelio*), Verdi's Otello and Radamès (*Aïda*).[4]

Emmons mentions not only the size and stamina of the voice and its relationship to Wagnerian roles, but she brings something quite new to our understanding of the Heldentenor: strength in the lower reaches of the voice and, most strikingly, an affinity with the baritone voice.

Some critics, when defining the Heldentenor, might also add that this type of singer no longer exists. Music critic Harold C. Schonberg, writing in the wake of Lauritz Melchior's death in 1973, claimed that, "In a way, the Heldentenor species died with him. Certainly nobody since Melchior's retirement has begun to approximate the glory of that voice... he had the most heroic voice of any singer of his day and, it could well be, any singer of history."[5] Could the Heldentenor possible be extinct? James King, himself a once-great Heldentenor, stated in 1991, "The heldentenor situation at the moment is that there aren't any, not that I know of. [Jon] Vickers and I are the last of the bunch."[6]

To paraphrase Mark Twain, the reports of the Heldentenor's death are greatly exaggerated. Perhaps, also, the Heldentenor's relationship to the baritone voice has been overstated. If the definitions of the Heldentenor mentioned above reflect conventional wisdom regarding this voice type, perhaps this conventional wisdom could be wrong. It

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[4] Shirlee Emmons, *Tirstanissimo: The Authorized Biography of Heroic Tenor Lauritz Melchior* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990): 7.
[5] Harold C. Schonberg, "The Heldentenor Species Died with Melchior," in *Facing the Music* (New York: Summit Books, 1981): 315.
[6] Jamie James, "American Hero," *Opera News*, vol. 55, no. 12 (March 2, 1991): 17.

is fair to say that an adequate understanding of the Heldentenor voice has been replaced by myth and generalization.

The "true" or "authentic" Heldentenor seems to be some mythical creature that most critics believe became extinct with the retirement of Lauritz Melchior. Years after his retirement, the world is waiting for another hero. Veteran music critic Martin Bernheimer expressed a common wish when he wrote the following in 2004:

> Bona-fide heldentenors are about as plentiful these days as dodos. The world is waiting for a heavyweight hero – just one, please – blessed with endless stamina, a voice of steel, a gutsy ego and a reasonably sympathetic persona. If such a paragon exists and can survive the cruel tessitura of Wagner's Tannhäuser, universal joy would border on delirium.[7]

It seems that there has never been an ideal Heldentenor. Perhaps that is because expectations concerning the Heldentenor are unrealistic. At any rate, there appears to be a great deal of misapprehension and misinformation that cloud the modern understanding of a Heldentenor. In order to come to a better understanding of this unique voice type it is necessary to examine the categories of the Heldentenor myth, one at a time.

During the course of this chapter, misperceptions of the Heldentenor that have evolved from Wagner's time to the present will be outlined. In the subsequent chapters, these myths will be reexamined, and the Heldentenor myths will be challenged. Some images that people have of Heldentenors are quite accurate (that they must sing for lengthy periods of time, for example) while others images (that of a "pushed-up" baritone

[7] Martin Bernheimer, "*Tannhäuser* Metropolitan Opera New York," *Financial Times*, November 22, 2004: Arts & Ideas, 13.

barking out high notes) are not accurate at all, yet they are the product of similar misunderstandings.

Myth One: Heldentenor Roles Are "Unsingable"

Heldentenor roles are generally regarded as the most difficult in all the operatic repertory. Many tenors who possess the necessary Heldentenor attributes are scared away from these roles because of their reputation for being, at the very least, terribly demanding. Critics and singers alike often refer to the great difficulty of these roles when discussing the Heldentenor situation. These complaints are not new – Wagner's contemporaries realized the challenges singers faced when performing his music – nor are they relegated to certain historical eras. Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick, who is known for his diatribes against Wagner, wrote: "It would be hard to find music more unvocal, more unsingable, than is to be found in *Tristan und Isolde*."[8]

Hanslick was not alone, of course, in his criticism of Wagner's supposedly anti-vocal music. Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky – one of many luminous figures who attended the first Bayreuth festival in 1876 – wrote to his friend Nadezhda von Meck in 1882, after seeing *Tristan und Isolde* in Berlin: "To keep singers all these hours singing melodies that have no autonomous existence, but are merely notes belonging to the symphony (in spite of lying very high, these notes are often drowned in the orchestral thunder), this is

[8] Eduard Hanslick, *Hanslick's Musical Criticisms*, trans. and ed. Henry Pleasants (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963 [repr. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1988]): 224.

certainly not the ideal at which modern musicians should aim."[9] Earlier, after seeing *Die Walküre* in Vienna in 1877, Tchaikovsky wrote: "There is not a single broad, complete melody which allows the singer room to blossom."[10]

These criticisms are not limited to Wagner's time, nor have they been made only by critics and fellow composers. Heldentenors themselves, the ones who know firsthand how difficult Wagner's music can be to sing, have been known to discuss how difficult their roles are. James King, who during his long career sang Lohengrin, Parsifal, and Siegmund to great acclaim, shared his experience of traveling to Nice, France at the age of sixty-five to replace a tenor in *Lohengrin*: "I sang four Lohengrins in eight days – a hundred high As in eight days! I don't think in my life I have ever endured such stress."[11] This from a man who had sung Verdi's Otello, Beethoven's Florestan, and almost all the major Strauss tenor roles.

Plácido Domingo, whose large repertory includes Lohengrin, Parsifal, and Siegmund, in addition to recordings of Tannhäuser and Walther, recently recorded the role of Tristan. Upon giving the reasons why he never essayed the role on stage, he said:

> He was cruel, Mr. Wagner, in the length of his writing. In 'Tristan,' by the time you finish the love duet, you could be having a baby, God help you. So I've always turned it down. I've had offers from Bayreuth and Vienna, and I was tempted because I do love this role. But all the time I think: 'Vocally, this will shorten my career, and how long do I have now?

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[9] Rosamund Bartlett, "Tchaikovsky and Wagner: A Reassessment," in *Tchaikovsky and His Contemporaries: A Centennial Symposium*, ed. Alexandar Mihailovic (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999): 107.
[10] *'To My Best Friend': Correspondence Between Tchaikovsky and Nadezhda von Meck, 1876-1878*, trans. Galina von Meck, ed. Edward Garden and Nigel Gotteri (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993): 88.
[11] James, "American Hero," *Opera News*: 16.

> Three years? Four? Who Knows?' So I stay with the studio, where I can take it bit by bit.[12]

With that statement, Domingo touched on the primary concern for most singers who would sing Wagner: the length of the roles. Unfortunately for the Heldentenor, this is one issue which seems to be less a myth than reality: no other tenor roles in all the operatic repertory call for so much singing. Consider that a typical Wagner opera will last, on average, about four hours. (In performance, with lengthy intermissions, the duration of one of these operas can be between five and six hours.) The Heldentenor will usually be responsible for a quarter or a fifth of that music, in some cases singing for more than fifty minutes in one performance. Most other operas would have the leading tenor sing half that much material. James King, like Domingo, never sang Tristan. "Tristan, you know, is twice as long as [Verdi's] Otello. And Otello is long enough." Otello is often considered the most strenuous role of the Italian opera, so one can see just how mountainous a task singing Tristan or Siegfried would be.

Tristan and Siegfried (in the opera of the same name) are the longest of the Heldentenor roles. "Siegfried is double the length of Verdi's *Otello*, 2,000 notes longer than Tristan and seven times the length of Canio in [Leoncavallo's] *Pagliacci*." [13] Though *I Pagliacci* is a one-act opera, Canio is considered a challenging and highly dramatic role. Imagine singing it seven times over; that is the challenge a Heldentenor faces. No wonder that Réné Kollo, another successful Heldentenor, said of performing

[12] Michael White, "Twilight of the CD Gods? A Studio 'Tristan' May Be the Last Ever," *New York Times*, January 5, 2005: E1.
[13] Emmons, *Tristanissimo*: 58.

Wagner, "I am for a long time afterwards almost completely spent physically, and I need days in bed before I can return to the stage."[14]

It seems that most people, critics and opera lovers alike, are happy if a Heldentenor simply has enough stamina to sing his entire role, from first note to last. Instead of focusing on the quality of singing or expression, critics tend to focus on whether a Heldentenor can actually survive through the role. *The New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini recently noted in a review of *Siegfried*: "Wagner buffs have been grateful for tenors who can at least get through the role with enough voice left to sing the demanding final scene with Brünnhilde, who does not even have to show up at the opera house until halfway through the show."[15]

While the fact that Wagner's operas are not only long but also force a tenor to sing to the point of exhaustion is well known, it is not the only issue that makes Heldentenor singing seem impossible. The nature of the Wagnerian orchestra is also problematic, with its volume, its independent nature, and its apparent lack of support for the singer. Complaints about Wagner's use of the orchestra originated in his own time, so that contemporaries like Tchaikovsky complained about how the singers' voices were "drowned in the orchestral thunder," as was quoted above. In another letter, Tchaikovsky

[14] Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit René Kollo* (Zürich: Orell Füssli & Friedrich Verlag, 1982): 95, quoted in Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold, *We Need a Hero! Heldentenors from Wagner's Time to the Present* (West New York, NJ: Weiala Press, 1989): 35.
[15] Anthony Tommasini, "A Nascent Hero (Endurance Required)," *New York Times*, April 19, 2004: E3.

claimed that "Wagner's orchestration is too symphonic, too overloaded and heavy for vocal music." [16]

Discussions of the size of the Wagnerian orchestra have not abated. A large voice is still considered, along with stamina, one of the necessary attributes of a Heldentenor, in order to compete with the large Wagnerian orchestra. Not only does Wagner's scoring require a large number of players, but the orchestration is complex and active, often containing the melody or a key leitmotif. Shirlee Emmons, when discussing the advantages of Lauritz Melchior's vocal endowment, observes the following: "Practically speaking, it cannot be denied that singing a major Wagner role demands a robust and sturdy sound, not least because the Wagnerian orchestra emits a richness of sound that mandates singers with enormous and powerful voices to sing over it."[17]

Lauritz Melchior himself discussed both the length of the Heldentenor roles as well as the character of the Wagnerian orchestra. "Most of [the Heldentenor roles] are very long, and the voice is not used as in Italian opera, where there are arias and you sing only the melody with the orchestra underneath – oom-pah-pah, oom-pah-pah. In Wagner you are part of the orchestra, and there are no breaks for applause after arias. And the big climax always comes at the end of the opera."[18]

Melchior's comment, that the singer is a part of the orchestra, reveals something else about Wagner. Whereas in traditional Italian or French opera, the singer is accompanied by a subordinate orchestra that does not bring attention unto itself, the

[16] Bartlett, "Tchaikovsky and Wagner: A Reassessment," *Tchaikovsky and His Contemporaries*: 106.
[17] Emmons, *Tristanissimo*: 34-5.
[18] Gerald Fitzgerald, "Speaking of Wagner," *Opera News*, vol. 34, no. 22 (March 28, 1970): 8.

Wagnerian orchestra is far more independent. Many feel that in Wagner, the orchestra is more important than the singer and, in terms of sheer sound, it often overpowers the artists on stage. Bryan Magee believes that the orchestra begins to overpower the singer in the second half of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. "In *Siegfried*, for the first time anywhere in *The Ring*, the spectator begins to realize that he is not always hearing the words. The sheer weight of orchestral sound between him and the voices is such as sometimes to drown the words altogether. . . He is presenting us with a solid wall of sound between us and the voices – and inevitably, in those circumstances, this wall of music itself becomes something that commands our attention."[19] In other words, the orchestra begins to dominate the singers completely. One could say that also happens during the course of *Tristan und Isolde*.

A Heldentenor must possess both stamina and a large voice in order to be successful. Yet those attributes do not reveal much about the nature of the vocal writing found in Wagner's scores. This vocal writing, in terms of phrasing, contour, range, and tessitura, is different from the vocal writing in most operas. Not surprisingly, then, myths also surround the type of signing that a Heldentenor must do.

Heldentenor myth tells us that Wagner did not write melodies that are easily sung, that is, if he wrote melodies at all. Many would contend that the melody is found in the orchestra, while the singer is left to declaim vocal lines that are not supported by the orchestra. In an 1870 review of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Eduard Hanslick writes of Wagner's musical style:

[19] Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000): 199.

> It is obvious that his method of composition is diametrically opposed to that used by all the old masters. Vocal melody was ever their first and decisive consideration; the accompaniment (free of complex) was subordinate. . . In *Die Meistersinger* the vocal part alone is not only non-independent, it is non-existent! The accompaniment is everything, an independent symphonic creation, an orchestral fantasy with an accompanying vocal part.[20]

Hanslick was not alone in his belief. Tchaikovsky had similar complaints: "[The singer] has to chase the orchestra all the time and worry about how to stick to his own part, which has no more importance in the score than the fourth horn part."[21] These comments were frequently made by Wagner's contemporary critics, those people who were not used to his new type of music drama. According to British critic Henry Chorley, "Singer's music has been stamped into bits as so much trash by the Wagners of New Germany."[22] These critics helped cement a belief that is held in many quarters to this day: the belief that Wagner gave the singer short shrift while he turned his attention to the orchestra.

Those like Chorley, Hanslick, and Tchaikovsky, who assume that Wagner's music is indeed anti-vocal, would also assume that the only way to sing this music would be to scream, yell, and, of course, perform the supposed "Bayreuth bark." Those critics could never imagine that the practices of bel canto singing could be applied to Wagner's music; their line of thinking states that those who are equipped to sing Heldentenor roles

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[20] Eduard Hanslick, "Die Meistersinger," in *Hanslick's Musical Criticisms*: 120.
[21] *'To My Best Friend*,' trans. Galina von Meck, ed. Edward Garden and Nigel Gotteri: 88.
[22] Henry Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections,* ed. Ernest Newman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926): 398.

without ruining their voices are very rare and that Heldentenor roles should be avoided by the majority of the singing populace.

Heldentenor roles, according to these critics, do not have real melodies, which, as stated earlier, have been given instead to the orchestra. What is left for the singer, they claim, are a series of notes that create a rough and broken vocal line, one made choppy by large, unnatural leaps. This line would be impossible to sing legato, because of these leaps, Wagner's intricate rhythms, and the density of the German consonants.

Conventional wisdom regarding Heldentenors states that the above demands often combine to ruin a singer's voice, foreshortening a career that might otherwise be long and prosperous, that is, if only that singer had avoided Wagner. Again, this idea is not new. (Most of the Heldentenor myths indeed stem from Wagner's time, as evidenced by the criticism of Chorley, Hanslick, and Tchaikovsky.) This myth was given credibility by the death of Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld shortly after the first performances of *Tristan und Isolde* in Munich in 1865. Schnorr, the first Tristan, had just completed an intense and lengthy rehearsal period and the first four performances of the opera, as well as one performance of Erik in *Der fliegende Holländer* and a concert of Wagner excerpts, including scenes from *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg.* For some who already thought Wagner's music impossible, Schnorr's death was proof of its deleterious effect. According to Geoffrey Skelton, "Since the death of the first Tristan, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, at the early age of twenty-nine rumours

had been spread that the strain of singing Wagnerian roles was killing." [23] (Of course, what most people fail to mention is that Schnorr was severely obese, as pictures easily illustrate, and that he died six days after rehearsing *Don Giovanni*, in which he sang Don Ottavio.) The idea that these roles are "voice-killing" continues to this day. One critic perpetuated this myth in a recent review of *Tristan und Isolde* at the Houston Grand Opera: "The title roles require singers who can deliver music that has shredded, almost literally, the vocal chords of many pretenders to Wagnerian fame."[24]

As for the issue of vocal range, Heldentenor roles are generally regarded as being lower than the tenor roles found in Italian bel canto operas and French Grand Opera. The tessitura of these roles is also regarded as being lower than that of the traditional Italian or French tenor roles. Yet, at the same time, Wagner managed to write vocal lines that exploit and exhaust the Heldentenor's *passaggio*, the area of his voice in which his middle and high registers dovetail. Plácido Domingo identified the use of the *passaggio* as being the element that makes singing Wagner so difficult. "The constant use of the middle voice and the *passaggio* zone, which forces one to push the voice, is one of the main reasons why Wagner is considered dangerous for the voice and especially for young singers."[25]

Even though a large portion of Heldentenor roles is centered in and around the *passaggio* – towards the higher end of the voice – paradoxically, Heldentenor roles are

[23] Geoffrey Skelton, *Wagner at Bayreuth: Experiment and Tradition* (London: White Lion Publishers Ltd., 1976): 47.
[24] Charles Ward, "Singers, Orchestra Combine to Make 'Tristan' Memorable," *Houston Chronicle*, January 29, 2000: Houston, 7.
[25] Plácido Domingo and Helena Matheopoulos, *My Operatic Roles* (London: Little, Brown, and Co., 2000): 225-6.

believed to be too low for the ordinary tenor, both in terms of range and tessitura. A typical Wagnerian tenor role has a range of c or c-sharp (below middle c) to a′ (which, for a tenor, would be a high a), while a typical lyric tenor role has a range of e-flat to b′.[26] Marc Weiner notes that, "While the high, lyric, Italianate tenor had to be able to sing an extended tessitura and to execute ringing high c's, the *Heldentenor* requires a powerful *low* c, an octave below middle c (c') and two octaves below the Italian's celebrated high note."[27]

In addition to this observation, Weiner reports that many tenors who perform the role of Siegmund, Wagner's lowest-lying Heldentenor role, complain about the need for powerful low notes.[28] For the typical tenor, attempts to project low notes over a large, dense orchestra would strain his voice, if not damage it. As Melchior himself noted, "What most often happens is that tenors press down their voices to get through the heavy Wagnerian orchestra. After a time, they lose their high notes and their voice."[29]

Therefore, not only do Heldentenors have to worry about singing at length and singing with strength, they have to sing lower than other tenors. For those who do not have naturally strong low registers, according to Melchior, singing those lower notes can not only strain their voices, but possibly damage them. That Wagner required his tenors to sing lower than their Italian and French counterparts, coupled with the fact that many

[26] There are, of course, exceptions to these vocal ranges, but the above represents the average.
[27] Marc Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 165. (Original emphasis.)
[28] "Interpreters of Siegmund often complain that the role requires power in the lower portion of the voice where it is vocally damaging for a lyric and spinto tenor to sing consistently with great force." Ibid.: 166.
[29] Fitzgerald, "Speaking of Wagner," *Opera News*: 8.

successful Heldentenors such as Melchior began their careers as baritones, brings us to another category of Heldentenor myth.

Myth Two: The Heldentenor Is a Baritone/Tenor

The Heldentenor is clearly different from traditional lyric tenors. A lyric tenor may sing anything from Mozart to Puccini, and his range extends to c´´ (a tenor's high c). Many writers, when trying to identify the differences between the Heldentenor and the lyric tenor, resort to a definition similar to the one provided by Shirlee Emmons at the beginning of this chapter: they label the Heldentenor as a baritone/tenor, believing that the Heldentenor has more in common with the baritone than the lyric tenor. This belief has created another myth, that the Heldentenor is equal parts baritone and tenor.

The history of Heldentenor singing has fueled this myth. Jean de Reszke, Melchior, Ramon Vinay, Set Svanholm, James King, and Plácido Domingo all began their training and, in most cases, their professional careers as baritones, and all of them eventually converted to tenor and sang Wagner with success. This myth, as opposed to the ones mentioned previously, was not created in Wagner's time; it seems to have originated after Melchior's tremendous success. Melchior played no small part in the establishment of the baritone/tenor myth, for he often maintained that the best way to train for Heldentenor singing is to begin as a baritone. When Melchior was asked what a singer needed in order to be a Heldentenor, he responded, "First of all, not to be an idiot. And next, to have the right sort of material – a little darker-colored voice than the

ordinary Italian lyric tenor. A baritone quality points the way to the dramatic or heroic Wagner tenor."[30]

Melchior believed that having experience as a baritone gives Heldentenors strength, particularly in the low register, where most other tenors lack power. He also believed that a solid low voice helped provided the necessary foundation for the rest of the voice. According to him, "You must have a good natural low register to build high notes. You can't put a skyscraper on sand."[31] James King, who made his professional debut on the eve of his thirty-sixth birthday, believes that his many years spent training as a baritone account for his vocal longevity. According to him, male voices develop slowly and it is safer for the potential Heldentenor to develop within the relative safety of the baritone repertory, presumably because baritone roles do not require many high notes or much *passaggio* singing. [32]

There is another advantage to training as a baritone, according to those who would advocate the baritone/tenor model, and that is the acquisition of a darker vocal timbre. As Marc Weiner observes, "The *Heldentenor* often begins his career as a baritone, and the timbre of his mature singing reflects its deeper beginnings."[33] Some critics and opera enthusiasts would consider this timbre to be more heroic or masculine than a brighter voice. A brighter, more conventional tenor voice and a dark voice could be of the same volume and the same ability to project (in other words, the audience could

[30] Ibid.: 8.
[31] Ibid.: 8.
[32] James, "American Hero," *Opera News*: 17.
[33] Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*: 164.

hear either voice equally well), but many Wagnerians would choose the heavier instrument. These expectations are not very reasonable and are rather limiting: they might scare off a tenor who is otherwise equipped to sing Wagner, and every Heldentenor is judged by these expectations. As vocal pedagogue Richard Miller writes, "Given current expectations of vocal timbre and weight in the Wagnerian voice, [the Heldentenor's] life is not easy."[34]

This dark timbre was never something that Wagner wanted or actually expected from his own singers. He did want, as will be shown in Chapter Two, a tenor that was diametrically opposed to the Italian bel canto or French Grand Opera tenor. One might assume that meant he wanted a more masculine-sounding tenor, but since today's singers sing in a heavier style than the singers of the nineteenth century, even current lyric tenors would sound heroic by nineteenth century standards.[35] Even Wagner's preferred voice teacher, Julius Hey, did not believe the Heldentenor was a type of baritone. Rather, he believed that the Heldentenor developed from a "low tenor" and was the "result of a rather long development."[36] Hey should have known, for he coached the first Siegfried, Georg Unger, for a year before the first performances of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in Bayreuth in 1876.

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[34] Richard Miller, *Training Tenor Voices*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993): 12-13.
[35] Henry Pleasants, *The Great Singers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981): 363-64. Pleasants argues that based on the young ages at which singers performed demanding roles (Ludwig Schnorr sang Tristan shortly before he turned twenty-nine) and based on the lighter voices heard on the first recordings made at the beginning of the twentieth century, nineteenth century singers probably could not have produced the heroic sounds we expect today.
[36] Julius Hey, quoted in Emmons, *Tristanissimo*: 13.

Though Wagner did not create the expectation of a Heldentenor with a dark timbre, most critics and vocal pedagogues expect that type of sound from a Heldentenor; some even include that attribute in their definition of a Heldentenor. Anthony Tommasini discussed the Heldentenor's attributes in a review for the *Christian Science Monitor*: "The heldentenor roles call for a different kind of singer, someone with stentorian thrust and darker natural vocal colorings."[37] The idea that Heldentenors not only have darker voices but are even retooled baritones can be found in the writings of vocal pedagogue William Vennard: "The *heroic tenor* (*Heldentenor*, *tenore robusto*) may develop from a spinto, but is more often a 'pushed-up baritone.' This kind of singing is only for rare voices, and probably not before the age of thirty-five."[38]

Those expectations have been generated by Heldentenors such as Melchior, Max Lorenz, Ramon Vinay, and James King, among the many heavier-voiced tenors who have made their mark singing Wagner. Melchior's long Heldentenor career, which began in 1918 and ended in 1950, surely accustomed audiences to a darker voice in roles such as Tristan, Siegfried, Siegmund and all the other Wagner heroes outside of Erik, Loge, and Walther, which Melchior never performed. In addition to the many stage performances he gave, Melchior also left an impressive number of recordings, which certainly have affected the public's perception of what a Heldtenor should sound like. Melchior's legacy has been so powerful and enduring that his name is still mentioned in some

[37] Anthony Tommasini, "A Tenor Hits High Notes of Career," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 18, 1994: The Arts, 12

[38] William Vennard, *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technic* (New York: Carl Fischer, Inc.: 1967): 79.

current reviews of Wagner performances. He has become the standard against which all subsequent Heldentenors have been measured.

In 1974, twenty-four years after Melchior's retirement, critic John Rockwell made an attempt to dispel the idea that a Heldentenor needed to have a baritonal voice in order to be successful: "It is my contention that a variety of voices have sung the more demanding Wagner tenor parts over the last few decades, that not all of them need suffer in comparison with Melchior's and that present-day European taste prefers lighter voices in these parts."[39] At the time of this observation, there were a few Heldentenors who had international success yet were not of the baritonal cast. Wolfgang Windgassen had recently retired and Réné Kollo was one of the busiest and most sought-after Heldentenors. He would soon be joined by Peter Hoffman and Siegfried Jerusalem, and today there are Heldentenors such as Thomas Moser and Peter Seiffert, both of whom began their careers as lyrical tenors before graduating to Wagner. No matter their success, these singers are still deemed less than satisfying, for they lack the dark timbre of Melchior.

Myth Three: Heldentenors Are Rare (Perhaps Even Extinct) Creatures

Martin Bernheimer's comparison of the Heldentenor to the ill-fated dodo is representative of many comments regarding the state of current Heldentenor singing. The dodo, after all, is a species of bird that has long been extinct. Some critics would venture to say that the Heldentenor species disappeared fifty-five years ago with

[39] John Rockwell, "The Heroes," *Opera News*, vol. 38, no. 20 (March 23, 1974): 12.

Melchior's retirement. Others would argue that the last true Heldentenor was Jon Vickers, or James King. It seems that critics cannot agree as to whether the Heldentenor is extinct or just in hibernation. At any rate, there are not enough Heldentenors. Critic Joshua Kosman notes: "Such singers appear once or twice in a generation, if at all."[40]

Whether the Heldentenor is alive and well or extinct, one thing is clear: conjecture regarding the Wagnerian tenor's extinction is nothing new. One could say that this type of speculation began with Wagner himself. His own favorite tenor, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, died shortly after creating the role of Tristan in 1865, at the age of only twenty-nine. Wagner mourned the loss of Schnorr and would recall this singular tenor years after his death. Seven years after Schnorr's passing, Wagner told his wife, Cosima, "We shall never find another Schnorr!" [41]

It is understandable that Wagner should have lamented the loss of a talented tenor. Throughout his life he had great difficulty in adequately casting his tenor roles, and Schnorr was about as close to an ideal Heldentenor as Wagner could find in his lifetime. According to Wagner's biographer Ernest Newman, "There seemed no future for *Tristan* now that Schnorr was dead."[42]

However, performances of *Tristan und Isolde* were carried out during Wagner's life. The idea that *Tristan* would meet its doom with Schnorr's death is an exaggerated one that seems typical of the way critics lament retired Heldentenors. Such was the case

[40] Joshua Kosman, "A Titanic 'Tristan' in Seattle; Eaglen, Heppner Tackle Title Roles," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 3, 1998: E1.
[41] Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 2 vols., ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977-1980), 1: 525.
[42] Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933-1946 [repr. London: Cassell, 1976]), 2: 454.

when Lilli Lehmann, the first Woglinde and Helmwige at Bayreuth in 1876, recalled Albert Niemann's portrayal of Siegmund. Niemann was the first Bayreuth Siegmund, as well as the Tannhäuser in the ill-fated Paris production of that opera in 1861. Lehmann wrote in her memoirs: "Siegmund was Albert Niemann – never since have I heard a Siegmund to equal him. He had intellect, vocal power and incomparable expression at his command. His singing, his acting and his stage presence took possession of everyone – this Siegmund was unique and will no more come again than will another Wagner." [43]

For those who lived in Wagner's time, there would never be another Schnorr or Niemann. A generation later, those who heard Jean de Reszke thought he could never be equaled. Years later, those who heard Lauritz Melchior live would mourn his retirement and suggest that he was the last real Heldentenor. That is the type of thinking that leads baseball fans to declare there will never be another Babe Ruth. (In their own ways, both opera and baseball are rooted in their respective pasts, and anything rooted in tradition tends to look back at the past more fondly than it ought.)

Those who don't believe that the Heldentenor is extinct would probably say that there are only a few singers at any given time who are capable of singing the most strenuous Wagnerian tenor roles, such as Tristan and Siegfried. In 1966, Martin Bernheimer declared: "The world of Wagnerian tenors is in crisis. In the international community of singers there may be five or six performers who can even get through these roles, and then usually with the help of a sympathetic conductor, an editor's scissors, and

[43] *Bayreuth: The Early Years*, ed. Robert Hartford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980): 49.

some cleverly executed vocal cheating."[44] Around that same time, record producer John Culshaw was trying to find a Siegfried for London Records' recording of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the first complete stereo recording of this work. In his account of the making of that recording, Culshaw stated, "The *Siegfried* situation was the bane of opera houses all over the world, because there was only one Siegfried: Wolfgang Windgassen."[45] Culshaw settled on Windgassen, a solid if not spectacular Heldentenor, simply because there were no other options.

Forty years later, contemporary reviews of Wagnerian performance do not indicate that much has changed. What Mr. Bernheimer said about the number of adequate Heldentenors seems to be true: there are only a few, yet there are many opera companies whose repertories include Wagner. Therefore, there are many performances in which inadequate Heldentenors sing. A rather positive review of a Heldentenor performance will mention a singer who is "just another hard-working stopgap in an era deprived of genuine Heldentenors."[46] A less than positive review – or perhaps a more unfortunate performance – will discuss the many inadequacies of a singer. Here is a prime example: "Most of his vocal performance, through the first act, remained lodged in the back of his throat. The music emerged in a strangled guttural growl – think Louis Armstrong without the volume or the rhythmic freedom." [47]

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[44] Martin Bernheimer, "The World of Wagnerian Tenors," *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 1966, quoted in Emmons, *Tristanissimo*: 315.
[45] John Culshaw, *Ring Resounding* (New York: Viking Press, 1967): 126.
[46] Martin Bernheimer, "Disney Would Surely Do Better By Wagner," *Financial Times*, April 19, 2000: 18.
[47] Joshua Kosman, "Goofy Siegfried Portrayal From Gray," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 28, 1999: D3.

The latter type of criticism is particularly common. One review of *Tannhäuser* mentioned how the leading tenor was "raw, loud, dramatically coarse and musically crude" and how he "sang impressively sharp for most of the first half-hour."[48] No other voice part in opera seems to garner as many bad reviews as the Heldentenor. That bad performances of Heldentenor roles occur at internationally renowned opera houses is proof of the lack of adequate Heldentenors. One can't imagine a Rodolfo in Puccini's *La Bohème* who couldn't sing the whole opera without losing his voice, yet one can read of a Tristan who "barely had sufficient voice to get through the first two acts, and gave up the ghost almost entirely in Act III, when he resorted to a yelping sprechgesang."[49]

Surely the current Heldentenor situation is not as bad as these critics make it seem, for there are a few singers today who manage to sing Heldentenor roles and earn favorable reviews. Ben Heppner has been earning positive reviews for his performances of Lohengrin, Walther, and Tristan for several years now. In a very recent review of a performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, it was reported that "Heppner sings every note accurately, musically, nobly."[50] Heppner's career suffered a blow three years ago when he endured a vocal crisis that sidelined him for a year. Those who buy into the myth that Wagnerian roles are "voice killers" might have thought his many performances of Tristan were the cause of his problems. (In fact, his vocal difficulties probably gave that myth

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[48] Bernard Holland, "A Realistic 'Tannhäuser' Returns to the Met," *New York Times*, November 1, 1997: B10.

[49] Hugh Canning, "That's Isolde, Folks…," *Sunday Times*, April 14: 2002. Accessed April 14, 2004, http://web.lexis-nexis.com.content.lib.utexas.edu:2048/universe/document?_m=8422e2eebc243d65f208b569adc9b1de&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVzz-zSkVA&_md5=a1e9a36ecca4f19059c566759b1b14ab.

[50] Rupert Christiansen, "Wagner's Vision Transformed by a Modern Magician," *Daily Telegraph*, April 19, 2005: Arts, 18.

more credibility.) Yet Heppner returned to the stage and is currently in good form as he continues to sing his three Wagner roles.[51]

Two other notable Heldentenors are Peter Seiffert and Johan Botha. Seiffert's Wagnerian repertory includes Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Walther, and Siegmund. He recently made his Metropolitan Opera debut in 2004 as Tannhäuser. His performance there led one critic to write: "I haven't heard a more exciting all-around Wagnerian tenor since Ben Heppner first bestrode the Met stage. Most singers in these holler-heavy roles are praised if they can go fours acts without bloodying the mat, but with his brassy ring and cottony, collected piano, Seiffert had the leisure to give the character some psychological contours."[52] That reviewer may not be well educated on Wagner's operas, for they consist of three acts, never four, yet even he could recognize that with most Wagnerian singers, the length of the roles usually overwhelms a tenor's vocal resources.

Like Heppner and Seiffert, Johan Botha also counts Lohengrin and Walther in his repertory. Botha has received some positive reviews and is relatively young for a Wagnerian singer. (Botha was born in 1965. Heppner was born in 1956; Seiffert in 1954.) In time these three singers may add more Wagnerian roles to their respective repertories, but as of now, only Heppner sings Tristan and only Seiffert sings Tannhäuser. None of them sing Siegfried. Most would-be Heldentenors dip their figurative toes into the Wagnerian waters by trying out the more lyrical roles, such as Lohengrin. Yet most of these tenors never aspire to such roles as Tristan and Siegfried. (Several lyric or

[51] For more information regarding Heppner's vocal problems, see Colin Eatock, "Back from the Nightmare," *Opera*, vol. 55 (July 2004): 789-793.
[52] Justin Davidson, "Singing the Perils and Praises of Sex," *Newsday*, November 22, 2004: B5.

Italianate singers have attempted Lohengrin. It is a little-known fact that the great Italian tenor Enrico Caruso sang the role, in Italian, in Buenos Aires in 1901.[53])

So, are Heldentenors extinct? No. Are there enough Heldentenors? No. Are there enough adequate Tristans and Siegfrieds? Certainly not. This, however, is nothing new. As we shall see in Chapter Four, Wagner had trouble finding tenors who were able to portray his heroes. Though he worked with a few singers who made significant contributions to Heldentenor singing – namely Joseph Tichatschek and the aforementioned Schnorr and Niemann – he often had difficulty finding other tenors when those singers were not available. Over a century later, the Heldentenor situation seems to be the same, in that only a few singers are capable of delivering acceptable performances.

Those critics who believe that Heldentenors are extinct probably do so because there was a time, not too long ago, when there were a number of Heldentenors who were capable of singing Wagner. Within a thirty-year period, singers such as Lauritz Melchior, Max Lorenz, Ludwig Suthaus, Hans Hopf, Ramon Vinay, Set Svanholm, Wolfgang Windgassen, Jon Vickers, James King, and Jess Thomas were all capable of delivering competent, even outstanding, performances of Heldentenor roles. Many of these singers took on the most difficult Wagner roles, such as Tristan and Siegfried, and did so for a number of years. When these singers retired, it seemed that there was no one who could replace them. Those who did, such as Réné Kollo, Peter Hoffman, and

[53] Jens Malte Fischer, "*Sprechgesang* or Bel Canto: Toward a History of Singing Wagner," trans. Michael Tanner, in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. John Deathridge (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992): 542.

Siegfried Jerusalem, were regarded as too light-voiced and they were never regarded as answers to the Heldentenor question.

Heldentenors are indeed rare, but they are not extinct. What the operatic world is waiting for, it seems, is a singer with a large, baritonally-based voice who can sing all the Wagnerian tenor roles and can sing them well. Only very few singers have been able to fit that mold, such as Lauritz Melchior or, in his own way, Set Svanholm. Today's Heldentenors do not focus solely on Wagnerian roles, the way Melchior did, and they also have more hectic and fast-paced lives than the singers of fifty and sixty years ago. For the majority of his career, Melchior was able to sing almost exclusively at the Metropolitan Opera, where he sang only Wagner. He did not need to travel frequently and in his early years he was able to devote time and energy to the arduous process of learning to sing Wagner in a healthy manner. Modern singers do not take such time for study and for rest, but are instead set upon a career rather quickly, singing lighter roles which immediately suit their voices and traveling as often as possible to make important debuts at opera houses across the world.

Desmond Shawe-Taylor, in an article titled "Wagner and His Singers," outlines two important factors in the decline of Heldentenor singing: the fast-paced life of the current opera singers, which does not allow for proper study and development, and the fact that today's performances of Wagner's operas are presented without cuts, something that did not happen earlier in the century. According to him:

> We can readily account for a more recent decline of standards by those well-worn but largely valid explanations with which we have become

> sadly familiar: the continual mobility of singers in the age of jet travel, their lack of a secure and at first reasonably obscure base in which to set down their artistic roots, their over-heavy and over-diversified work-load, the ever-present temptation to tackle unsuitable roles because of the shortage of more appropriate exponents, the constant pull of recording and of broadcasting and television engagements. There is simply (we are obliged to conclude) too much afoot, too many conflicting temptations, to permit the steady maturing of voice and style in some quiet but artistically not negligible backwater.[54]

As for cuts, current performance practice frowns upon them and considers them sacrilegious, but that was not always the case. Mr. Shawe-Taylor writes the following in regard to performances of *Tristan*: "We may feel virtually certain that Jean de Reszke invariably benefited from the huge, then standard cut in the first part of the long scene between the lovers in Act II and in the scene of Tristan's delirium in Act III: and it is even doubtful whether the stalwart Melchior was ever expected to sing the complete versions of these scenes at Covent Garden or at the Metropolitan."[55] (In fact, the first performances of *Tristan* were performed with two cuts.[56])

The rarity of the Heldentenor is not a myth. If there were more adequate Heldentenors today, there would be fewer complaints made by critics and fewer woeful performances. The extinction of the Heldentenor, however, is terribly exaggerated. It would be more accurate to say the Heldentenor is in decline at the moment, and that the world is waiting for another Melchior. Perhaps one day he will arrive, but most likely he will not – not, that is, without the proper training and development. Outlining the steps

[54] Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "Wagner and His Singers," in *Wagner in Performance*, ed. Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992): 25.
[55] Ibid.: 22.
[56] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 3: 365.

for developing a Heldentenor would be enough material to fill another treatise. Suffice it to say, a school for training Heldentenors would be welcomed by all.

Chapter Two: Wagner's Development of the Heldentenor

Richard Wagner's creation of the Heldentenor is intimately tied to his development as a composer. This development led him from his youth, when he was susceptible to influence, to his mature period, when he rejected the models he once admired and set out on his own path. Ultimately, the Heldentenor arose from Wagner's attempt to create operas that were distinctly German, which for him meant creating works that were decidedly non-Italian and non-French.

When Wagner arrived in Paris on September 17, 1839, eager to make his mark, he was a young man of twenty-six. He had already composed two operas – *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot* – and had composed the first two acts of his next opera, *Rienzi*. The young Wagner had dreams of securing a production of one of his operas in Paris, which was then the cultural and operatic capital of Europe. In addition to native French composers such as Fromental Halévy and Hector Berlioz, Paris had attracted many foreign-born composers, including Gioacchino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti, and Giacomo Meyerbeer.[1]

Wagner's primary musical influences were Carl Maria von Weber and Ludwig van Beethoven, two composers who represented, for him, true German musical nature. Though these two composers – Beethoven, in particular – would continue to influence him and be objects of his admiration, in the 1830's Wagner came under the sway of

[1] Rossini (1792 – 1868) moved to Paris in 1824, after composing thirty-four operas in Italy. *Guillaume Tell*, his last opera, was written for Paris and was a great success there in 1829. Donizetti (1797 – 1848) moved to Paris in 1838. Both *La filled du regiment* and *La favorite* premiered there in 1840. Meyerbeer (1791 – 1864), composer of *Robert le diable*, *Les Huguenots*, *Le Prophète*, and *L'Africaine*, was the chief figure in French Grand Opera and was born in Germany.

Italian bel canto and French Grand Opera. In the six years prior to his time in Paris, Wagner had served as chorus master in Würzburg and musical director in Magdeburg, Königsberg, and Riga. During those years he conducted German operas such as *Fidelio*, *Der Freischütz*, and *Oberon*, but he also performed operas by Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, Vincenzo Bellini, and Rossini. Wagner's early operas contain elements of French and Italian style, and Wagner additionally admired the style and technical proficiency of the Italian singers.

In three articles written for various publications in the 1830's, Wagner expressed his admiration for Italian singers and the Italian vocal style, particularly Bellini's pure and expressive melodies. He also expressed two ideas that would remain consistent throughout his lifetime: Italians were by nature better singers than Germans, and Italian music and German singers were incompatible. In "On German Opera," from 1834, Wagner writes: "Song, after all, is the organ whereby a man may musically express himself; and so long as it is not fully developed, he is wanting in true speech. In this respect the Italians have an immeasurable advantage over us; vocal beauty with them is a second nature."[2] At this stage in his life, Wagner respected the vocal ability of the Italians.

However, only a few years later, Wagner's attitude towards Italian singers would change. Although Wagner never denigrated the vocal technique of the Italians, he often made derogatory comments concerning their artistry, or lack thereof, and the material

[2] Richard Wagner, "On German Opera," *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. and ed. William Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1892-99 [repr. New York: Broude Bros., 1966]), 8: 55.

which they sang. His criticism of Italian and French singers was usually subtle. In a later article, "On German Music," written from Paris in 1840, Wagner would make this claim:

> Somebody once said: The Italian uses music for love, the Frenchman for society, but the German as science. Perhaps it would be better put: The Italian is a singer, the Frenchman a virtuoso, the German a – musician. The German has a right to be styled by the exclusive name 'Musician,' for of him one may say that he loves Music for herself, – not as a means of charming, of winning gold and admiration, but because he worships her as a divine and lovely art that, if he gives himself to her, becomes his one and all.[3]

Clearly, Wagner defines only the German as a serious musician. He claims that the Germans have a pure devotion to their music making while the French and Italians are only concerned with popularity and virtuosity. According to Wagner, only the Germans could produce true art.

Wagner's criticism of Italian and French musical culture, particularly the works performed in Paris and the audiences that attended them, was much more direct. He wrote in his *Autobiographical Sketch* of the "flabby lack of character of our modern Italians" and "the frivolous levity of the latest Frenchmen."[4] He called *La favorite*, a popular opera by Donizetti that premiered in Paris in 1840, "a very weak work of the Italian maestro which had nonetheless been received enthusiastically by a Paris public whose tastes had already sunk very low."[5] Wagner continued to disparage what he

[3] Wagner, "On German Music," *Prose Works*, 7: 85.
[4] Richard Wagner, "Autobiographical Sketch," *The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895 [repr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993]): 9.
[5] Richard Wagner, *My Life*, trans. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 189.

considered trivial operas by the likes of Donizetti, Rossini, and Meyerbeer; Parisian audiences and singers such as Giovanni Battista Rubini, the Italian tenor who was the star of the Parisian opera stages, also came under the attack of Wagner's pen.

Wagner's change in attitude, from admiration to criticism, was caused by his two-and-a-half year stay in Paris, a period in which his artistic dreams were not realized. Though Wagner completed the last three acts of *Rienzi* and wrote *Der fliegende Holländer* there, he failed to have any of his operas produced in Paris. The only employment that he secured during that time was provided by the publisher Maurice Schlesinger, who commissioned from Wagner ten articles on music for his *Gazette musicale* as well as various arrangements of the score of *La favorite*. Instead of success, Wagner found poverty and the humiliation of not being recognized for his genius. Wagner left Paris for Dresden in April 1842 with a bitter taste in his mouth, particularly in regard to those things he had previously valued: Parisian musical tastes, French Grand Opera, and the Italian method of singing.

Wagner's years in Paris, ones that Cosima Wagner would later recall as "the most wasted years of his life,"[6] fueled his desire to create a uniquely German style of opera and they were particularly instrumental to his creation of the Heldentenor. Believing that German voices were not suited to Italian and French opera, he wanted to invent a type of opera Germans could call their own, one in which they would not have to compete with – or be influenced by – the virtuosity of the Italians or the style of the French. Italian and

[6] Noted in the entry of September 14, 1879 in *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 2: 364.

French operas were written for the Italian and French languages, romance languages that have much more in common with each other than they do with German. The German language and the German vocal endowment, according to Wagner, could not be fitted to Italian ornamentation or coloratura, nor would it be suitable for the high-lying vocal writing employed in French Grand Opera. The Heldentenor, therefore, grew out of Wagner's desire to create a tenor voice part that was German in style and not based on Italian or French models. One could say that the Heldentenor is the antithesis of the Italian or French tenor.

Wagner's Early Views, Works, and Influences

As stated earlier, prior to finding his own unique musical voice, Wagner was susceptible, like most young composers, to many influences. These influences were disparate, from German composers such as Beethoven and Weber, to Italian and French composers like Bellini, Spontini, and Auber. Wagner's early works reflect the influences of these composers. Thus the Heldentenor, as we know it today, did not truly emerge until after his experience of failure in Paris and the rejection of his earlier idols.

Wagner's early compositional output consisted of some early piano sonatas and overtures, seven pieces for Goethe's *Faust*, a Symphony in C Major, and three operas: *Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot*, and *Rienzi*. *Die Feen*, which was written primarily in 1833 and completed on January 6, 1834, was composed in the style of German Romantic opera, which reflected one of Wagner's earliest influences, Weber. According to Barry Millington: "For *Die Feen* (The Fairies), however, Wagner chose the style which came

most naturally to him: German Romantic opera was in his blood. As a boy he had regarded Weber as something of an idol and he had been especially attracted by *Der Freischütz*."[7] Wagner had seen this opera in Dresden in 1827 and would later recall in his autobiography, "Nothing moved me more strongly than the music of *Freischütz*." [8]

Ludwig van Beethoven was another major influence in Wagner's life. Wagner would often express his lifelong admiration for Beethoven's compositions, and they were particularly important in motivating the young Wagner to pursue a career in music. Wagner's first live encounters with Beethoven's music occurred in 1828, the year he made his first attempts at musical study. He heard Beethoven's seventh symphony at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig on January 17, 1828, a performance that proved to a formative experience for the adolescent Wagner. He then began to study Beethoven's scores, copying some of them out, and even making piano transcriptions of the Choral Fantasy and the ninth symphony.[9]

One of Wagner's other important influences, singer Wilelmine Schröder-Devrient, had an association with Beethoven, for she was famous for her portrayal of Leonore in *Fidelio*.[10] Schröder-Devrient made her fame primarily through her acting, which was more passionate and intense than the typical operatic performance was at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Wagner first heard Schröder-Devrient not as

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[7] Barry Millington, *Wagner* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1984): 140.
[8] Richard Wagner, *My Life*: 28.
[9] Klaus Kropfinger traces the influence of Beethoven upon Wagner in *Wagner and Beethoven*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For more information on Beethoven's affect upon the young Wagner, see the second chapter, titled "Wagner's experience of Beethoven."
[10] Though Wagner remembers having seen Schröder-Devrient as Leonore in Leipzig (*My Life*: 37), it would not have been possible, as shown in Millington, *Wagner*: 7, and Kropfinger, *Wagner and Beethoven*: 19.

Leonore, but as Romeo in Bellini's *I Capuleti ed i Montecchi*, in 1834. For young Wagner, the impression she made on him was immense: "When I look back across my entire life I find no event to place beside this in the impression it produced on me. Whoever can remember this wonderful woman at that period of her life will certainly confirm in some fashion the almost demonic fire irresistibly kindled in them by the profoundly human and ecstatic performance of this incomparable artist."[11]

While Beethoven's music and Schröder-Devrient's acting would influence his later works and his preference for how those works should be performed, they did not influence Wagner's next opera, *Das Liebesverbot*, which was completed in early 1836. This opera has more in common with Italian opera, particularly Bellini, than it does with Wagner's German influences. At the time of the opera's composition, Wagner had been serving as musical director of the Magdeburg opera, where he conducted works such as Bellini's *I Capuleti ed i Montecchi* and *La Straniera*; Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *Otello*, and *Tancredi*; Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, *La Muette de Portici*, and *Le Maçon*; and other operas by Boieldieu and Cherubini. Wagner became familiar with French and Italian operas not only at Magdeburg, but also in Würzburg, Königsberg, and Riga, for these operas were quite popular in Germany at that time.[12]

In 1834, the year that he finished *Die Feen* and began the text of *Das Liebesverbot*, Wagner wrote the first of many articles, essays, treatises, and other writings that he would produce for the rest of his life. His first article, "On German Opera,"

[11] Wagner, *My Life*: 37.
[12] A list of the operas that Wagner was involved with at Würzeburg, Magdeburg, and Riga appears in Appendix IV of *Bayreuth: The Early Years*, ed. Robert Hartford: 272.

which appeared in 1834 in Leipzig's *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* in June, expressed admiration for the Italians' warmth and vocal beauty, which, according to Wagner, is "second nature" to them. He also contrasts the Italian and the German, in this case placing the Italians in a favorable light: "We are too intellectual and much too learned, to create warm human figures. *Mozart* could do it; but it was the beauty of Italian Song, that he breathed into his human beings."[13] Throughout his life, Wagner would aver that the Germans were inherently different from the Italians and the French, and therefore this early article, though expressing an admiration that would be missing from his later writings, was consistent with his beliefs.

At this time in his life, though he had been influenced by German musicians such as Beethoven and Weber, and though he would return proudly to his German musical heritage, Wagner was being swayed by the pleasures of Italian music. Ernest Newman writes that Wagner was "beginning to feel the intoxication of the Italian and French music that went so much more lightly on its feet and took the world as something to be sensuously enjoyed for the moment and be done with, not philosophied about and brooded upon in the heavy German manner."[14]

Another article by Wagner, "Pasticcio," was published in 1834, this time in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and signed in the amusing nom de plume "Canto Spianato." Here Wagner bemoans the lack of beautiful singing in Germany, stating that beautiful, well-trained voices are rare: "Many a mile might we journey before we could assemble a

[13] Wagner, "On German Music," *Prose Works*, 8: 55.
[14] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 1:111.

couple of dozen good singers really worthy of the name, singers who should possess not only a *well-trained organ*, but also a *good delivery*, *correct declamation*, *pure enunciation*, *sympathetic expression and thorough knowledge of music.*"[15] Wagner claims that one does not hear well-executed technical feats such as trills, diminuendos, and *portamenti*, nor do singers possess an equalized scale, or even correct intonation. We know that Wagner is writing about German singers because, quite simply, he had yet to travel abroad to Italy or France.

Wagner blames the state of singing on two factors: one, the lack of proper singing schools in Germany and, two, the attempts by German singers to perform roles which are not suited to them. Germans are famous for their instrumental music, and the voice needs the attention and study that other instruments receive:

> That the Singing-voice, like every other instrument, needs schooling, and indeed a very careful schooling, in which the *production* of the voice is dealt with quite apart from the *rendering* (taste and expression), no connoisseur will deny; but where, in all our German fatherland, are there training-schools for higher vocal culture?[16]

This statement, coming from a twenty-one year-old Wagner is rather prescient, for one of Wagner's desires, stated numerous times throughout his life, was to establish a music school in which singers could be trained to perform his works.

In "Pasticcio," Wagner also believes that Italians will only sing roles for which they are suited, while German singers will attempt to sing nearly everything. He states

[15] Wagner, "Pasticcio," *Prose Works*, 8:60 (Wagner's emphasis).
[16] Ibid.: 59-60.

that a singer should never perform a role for which he or she is not physically, technically, or "psychically" qualified. Wagner returns to this idea only a few years later, in the article "On German Music," written for the *Gazette musicale* in Paris in 1840. There, Wagner writes of German singers: "those voices, which sang the lovely German *Lied* so touchingly, will make all haste to learn Italian colorature. But these passages and colorature refuse to suit them. . . Nature has denied him that flexibility of one chief organ which we find in the throats of the happy Italians."[17] Wagner believed that the German singer was physiologically different from the Italian or French singer, and therefore a German singer should not attempt to sing roles written for those voices.

Wagner was not alone in bemoaning the lack of fine singers in Germany. It seems that the level of singing in Germany was in truth far below that found in Italy or France. One of Wagner's contemporaries, British music critic Henry Chorley, traveled through Germany at about the same time Wagner was in Paris, and Chorley made several observations regarding the quality of singing in Germany. In *Modern German Music*, Chorley writes of "the inferior singers and coarse operatic actors of modern Germany"[18] and the "national want of ear for the charm of vocal tone"[19] that he witnessed. His only praise of German singing was reserved for the bass voice, which, he claims, had thrived in Germany since Handel's era.

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[17] Wagner, "On German Music," *Prose Works*, 7: 87.
[18] Henry F. Chorley, *Modern German Music*, 2 vols. (London, 1854 [repr. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973]), 1: 269.
[19] Ibid., 2: 136.

According to Chorley, tenors were the worst of the lot of German singers: "There is something in the tone of German tenor voices. . . which, after a time, becomes absolutely distressing to all but German ears: a certain throaty violence, with which notes at the top of and above the average male register, are taken by force, in chest-voice."[20] He wrote of a tenor in Vienna who was "not a powerful singer, but an agreeable one, because his voice was less throaty and nasal than the voice which for the most part appears to be thought expressive and dramatic by German tenors."[21] Elsewhere, he wrote of a popular German tenor who "never could have been accepted as a favourite elsewhere than in Germany."[22]

Ernest Newman put it more simply, stating that "good German singers were scarce." According to him, "Travelled [sic] Germans, and those in the larger towns that supported an Italian opera, knew well enough that the foreigners were generally superiors of the Germans in technique and style."[23] Throughout Wagner's life, particularly in the early stages of his career, he would claim that the foreigners were superior primarily because they were singing their own music, which was written with their capabilities in mind. German singers, on the other hand, often had to sing Italian and French operas in German translations, which were usually poor. So, not only were German tenors singing music that was ill-suited to their physiology – or so Wagner's ideas would have it – but

[20] Ibid., 2: 336-7.
[21] Ibid., 2: 134-5.
[22] Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*: 122.
[23] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 1: 99, 116.

they also sang music that was rendered nonsensical by poor translations that yielded bad prosody.

For Wagner, the original libretti of Italian and French operas were frivolous at best, so that the singers were forced to deliver a "nothing-saying 'text'."[24] That problem is exacerbated for German singers, who must sing poor translations: "Neither a poetic, nor a musical intelligence has ever been set in motion for these translations, but they have been put together by people who knew nothing of either music or poetry. . . The poetical labours of the translator had consisted in furnishing the vulgarest prose with the absurdest end-rhymes."[25] Wagner believed that the end result of singing inadequate translations was that German singers soon paid less attention to the words they were singing, neglecting expression and favoring only musical effects. For Wagner the dramatist, this type of performance was anathema.

Wagner would soon attempt to write pieces that were, in his opinion, well suited to German voices and German temperaments. Yet before setting to that task, Wagner made an attempt at writing an opera in the style of French Grand Opera, the large, epic works which had become so popular in Paris. His efforts resulted in *Rienzi*, which he began in 1838 and whose first two acts he composed in Riga, where he served as musical director of the opera. Wagner completed the opera in Paris, which was fitting, since it was written in the French Grand Opera style and resembles, musically, the works of Spontini. The very format of the opera, with its five acts and ballet, is that of French

[24] Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner., 1893 [repr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995]): 43.
[25] Ibid.: 359.

Grand Opera, as are other typical features such as large public scenes and a prominent chorus.

The opera shares little in common with Wagner's later operas. Perhaps the clearest affinity it has to his later works is its length: according to Wagner, the first performance in Dresden lasted, with intermissions, more than six hours. In keeping with the opera's length, the leading tenor role is also terribly long, a feature that anticipates long Heldentenor roles.

Departing From Italian and French Models

It did not take long for Wagner to become displeased with Paris. He soon realized it would be difficult for him to produce one of his operas there and it must have been particularly disappointing for him to see that the operas of Meyerbeer and Donizetti, composers whose talents he considered inferior to his own, were tremendously popular. While those composers thrived, Wagner's only employment in Paris came from writing articles and from producing various arrangements of Donizetti's *La Favorite*, a work, as we have already seen, he found contemptible. Wagner's increasingly bitter and negative views of French and Italian opera were obviously fueled in some part by his envy of those composers who were having success, particularly since Wagner could not enter into their world.

In addition to the personal feelings that sprang from what Wagner perceived to be his rejection by the musical elite in Paris, he was genuinely dismayed by operatic performance practice there. The deficiencies of opera in Paris were, for Wagner,

manifold: first, according to him the works themselves were rather flimsy, paying attention only to melody and effects and not drama; second, the performances were little more than semi-staged, costumed concerts, static by today's standards; third, the singers not only neglected the drama at hand, they couldn't be bothered to sing their whole parts evenly, for they would only wait for climactic high notes or cadenzas in order to unleash their full voice and showcase their virtuosity; and finally, works were often cut or otherwise treated disrespectfully, such as by interpolating high notes or cadenzas where the composer had not written any.[26]

For Wagner, opera was drama, and he was upset when the drama suffered for the gain of musical effects. Yet the drama was often the last thing on the minds of the Parisian opera stars and their audiences. One of his articles for Schlesinger's *Gazette musicale*, "The Virtuoso and the Artist," reflects Wagner's views of contemporary Italian operatic practice. In that article, Wagner reviews a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at the Théâtre Italien, in which the star tenor Rubini sang Don Ottavio, not a very rewarding part for a star tenor, but one that Rubini managed to turn into a showcase for his technical prowess.

Wagner begins the article by writing about the nature of the virtuoso: "Write how you will, ye composers, but mind it is something the singer sings gladly!"[27] He then discusses the baritone Louis Lablache, who sang Leporello in the performance. Lablache embodied his character, acting every moment, yet the audience reacted coolly to his

[26] Wagner complains of these problems in his 1873 essay, "A Glance at the German Operatic Stage of To-day," *Prose Works*, 5: 263-284.
[27] Wagner, "The Virtuoso and the Artist," *Prose Works*, 7: 115.

performance. Wagner begins to wonder why the audience came to the theater: "A Paris audience will spend much, 'tis true, but always expects a return for its money, be it only a worthless one."[28] Wagner then realizes the answer: they have come to see the great Rubini and his vocal fireworks.

Wagner's description of Rubini's performance of Don Ottavio's Act II aria, "Il mio tesoro," deserves to be quoted at length:

> 'Ottavio' was left alone on the stage; I believed he was about to make an announcement, for he came right up to the prompter's box: but there he stayed, and listened without moving a feature to the orchestral prelude to his B flat aria. This ritornel seemed to last longer than usual; but that was a simple illusion: the singer was merely lisping out the first ten bars of his song so utterly inaudibly that, on my discovery that he really was giving himself the look of singing, I thought the genial man was playing a joke. Yet the audience kept a serious face; it knew that was coming; for at the eleventh bar Rubini let his F swell out with such sudden vehemence that the little reconducting passage fell plump upon us like a thunderbolt, and died away again into a murmur with the twelfth. I could have laughed aloud, but the whole house was still as death: a muted orchestra, an inaudible tenor; the sweat stood on my brow. Something monstrous seemed in preparation: and truly the unhearable was now to be eclipsed by the unheard-of. The seventeenth bar arrived: here the singer has to hold an F for three bars long. What can one do with a simple F? Rubini only becomes divine on the high B flat: there must he get, if a night at the Italian Opera is to have any sense. And just as the trapezist swings his bout preliminary, so "Don Ottavio" mounts his three-barred F, two bars of which he gives in careful but pronounced crescendo, till at the third he snatches from the violins their trill on A, shakes it himself with waxing vehemence, and at the fourth bar sits in triumph on the high B flat, as if it were nothing; then with a brilliant roulade he plunges down again, before all eyes, into the noiseless... This was the trick for which one had assembled... and felt richly rewarded by the coming-off of this one wondrous moment when Rubini leapt to B flat![29]

[28] Ibid.: 118.
[29] Ibid.: 119-20.

Prior to this description, Wagner tells his readers that Rubini hardly bothered to act. Now he reports that at the outset of the aria, the tenor barely sang, only to unleash a "dramatic" crescendo. Comparing Rubini's vocal feat to gymnastics, Wagner states that Rubini leapt up to a high b-flat´, a note that must have been interpolated, for it is not to be found in Mozart's score.

Wagner's description of Rubini's performance might seem exaggerated, but Chorley, who was an admirer of Rubini's singing, tells a similar story: "His figure was awkward; he dressed as any one else pleased, without a thought of his own as to taste, character, or picturesque effect. . . He rarely tried to act. . . The voice and the expression were, with him, to 'do it all.'"[30] Wagner, however, was dismayed not only by Rubini's performance, but also by the Parisian audience's preference for trivial virtuosity:

> This uncommonly elegant audience shewed not a spark of interest in the stuff of our 'Don Juan'; to them it was plainly a mere lay-figure on which the drapery of unmixed Virtuosity had first to be hung, to give the music-work its formal right to existence. But *Rubini* alone could do this properly, and so it was easy to guess why just this cold and venerable being had become the darling of the Parisians, the chartered 'idol' of all cultivated friends of Song. In their predilection for this virtuosic side of things they go so far as to give it their whole aesthetic interest, while their feeling for noble warmth, nay even for manifest beauty, is more and more amazingly cooling down.[31]

This was the type of practice, and the type of audience, that Wagner would aim to correct when writing *Opera and Drama* ten years later. In 1851, the year he completed

[30] Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*: 21.
[31] Wagner, "The Virtuoso and the Artist," *Prose Works*, 7: 120-1.

Opera and Drama, Wagner again commented on the condition of operatic performance in "A Communication to My Friends." For Wagner, the tyranny of the singer, as he perceived it, and the audience's approval, were conditions that hampered any attempt opera might make of being drama:

> In our Opera the *singer*, by virtue of the purely material attributes of his voice, usurps the first place; whilst the *actor* takes the second, or even a quite subsidiary rank. On the other side of the line, stands, logically enough, a public that looks chiefly for satisfaction of the purely sensuous demands of its nerve of hearing, and thus almost entirely abjures the enjoyment of a dramatic portrayal.[32]

In order to break away from these practices, ones that he sensed came from the Italian style of opera performance that dominated Europe, Wagner believed he had to create something new. The ultimate result of Wagner's Paris episode is that the experience convinced him to create something that was truly German and not influenced by foreign elements. As Newman writes, Wagner had become "disillusioned with regard not only to his prospects in Paris but to French taste in general; almost the only good thing Paris had done for him was to make a German of him once more."[33]

Wagner had long believed that Germans could not sing Italian music naturally. Perhaps this idea was developed when his older sister Klara made her debut in 1824 at the Italian opera in Dresden, as Angiolina in Rossini's *Cenerentola*, at the tender age of sixteen. Her operatic career was short due to vocal problems; Wagner blamed her

[32] Wagner, "A Communication to My Friends," *The Art-Work of the Future*: 337. The "Communication" was written as a preface to a planned publication of the libretti of *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*. Wagner wrote this preface, which tries to explain his new artistic direction, while he was in exile in Zurich.
[33] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 1: 321.

premature training and the early strain this placed on her voice. Though he did not say so explicitly, one might imagine that he thought her singing of Italian music precipitated her vocal troubles.

Wagner believed there were three problems confronting the German who attempted to sing Italian or French works. To summarize, the first problem, as he saw it, was that German singers lacked the flexible, supple throats of the Italian singers. (It should be noted that the Italian method of singing was employed in Paris, where a number of Italian and Italian-trained singers performed.) The German singer was therefore physiologically different from the Italian, and Italianate vocal writing, with its many high notes and its coloratura, did not suit the German. The second problem was that the German singer often had to sing Italian and French works in poor German translations. Vocal writing intended for Romance languages simply could not be executed in the German language. The third problem was the difference in temperament and spirit between the German singers and their foreign counterparts. Wagner writes of the German's devout, even pious approach to music in articles such as "On German Music" and "What is German?" The Italians, on the other hand, are superficial and sensual in their approach to music.

Wagner's strongest statements regarding a German style of singing are found in two essays written later in his career. In an 1865 report to Ludwig II, the King of Bavaria who became Wagner's patron in 1864, Wagner outlines the need for a music school in Munich. Wagner's proposed music school would focus on singing and the proper rendering of German works. Germans are too reliant upon Italian and French styles, ones

that do not fit the German: "The Germans have not as yet advanced beyond a mere aping and imitating of the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the French and Italians, especially as concerns the mode-of-rendering current at our theatres."[34] These foreign styles cannot be applied to German opera because of the difficult nature of the German language:

> With us Germans the maturing of an art of Song is peculiarly difficult, infinitely more difficult than with the Italians, much harder even that with the French. The cause resides not merely in the influences of climate on the voice itself, but the most demonstrably in our Speech's idiosyncrasies. Whereas the extremely ductile vowels of the Italian language have simply been moulded into more effective sound-bodies by the graceful energy of its consonants, and even the Frenchman has kept his far more limited vowel-force in flow through a shaping of his consonants which often leads, indeed, to unintelligibleness, but is prompted solely by the need of euphony: the German language, after its downfall at the close of the Middle Ages, and despite the exertions of the great poets of the German renaissance, has not yet recovered sufficiently to enable it to challenge any sort of comparison with its Romanic, or even its Slavonic neighbours, in respect of pleasing sound. A tongue with vowels mostly short and mute, extensible only at cost of intelligibility; hemmed-in by consonants, most expressive indeed, but heaped regardless of all euphony: such a Speech must necessarily comport itself to Song quite otherwise than those aforesaid.[35]

Therefore, since the only model of singing, the Italian one, does not suit the German, a new, national style of singing must be created and taught to those who wish to perform German opera. Wagner writes that a truly German style of song will be opposed to the Italian's "long-drawn play of vowels" and will be "an energetic speaking-accent, and therefore quite admirably fitted for dramatic delivery."[36]

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[34] Wagner, "A Music-School for Munich," *Prose Works*, 4: 175.
[35] Ibid.: 181-2.
[36] Ibid.: 182.

Wagner continues by writing that while to the Italian singing comes naturally, the German has had a number of difficulties to overcome. Fortunately for the German, "Nature" has given him "strength and perseverance."[37] Such comments are typical for Wagner, who believed that the Italians were born blessed yet were careless, while Germans had to fight for everything they had, and were able to persevere because of their nobility and purity of character. Within this music school proposal, however, Wagner does recommend a "reflective" study of the Italian style of singing, so that German can absorb some of the "euphony" of the Italian language.

Wagner develops similar ideas in his 1872 essay, "Actors and Singers." After criticizing French theater and Italian opera – with its "affected pathos and unnatural stilted prosing"[38] – Wagner states that Germans have nothing in common with those genres, for they are foreign to the German's nature. The only way a German could sing Italian music would be "by abandoning his native aptitudes and Italianising himself."[39] The way to do that, according to Wagner, is by learning the Italian language: "No other language could engender or sustain so sensuous a pleasure in sheer vocalism."[40] Singing Italian music in an Italian style in the German language, however, is something that cannot be done: "We must abstain from it in toto. If we insist on speaking our mother-tongue to that 'canto,' it becomes a jumble of inarticulate vowels and consonants, which

[37] Ibid.: 183.
[38] Wagner, "Actors and Singers," *Prose Works*, 5: 201.
[39] Ibid.: 201.
[40] Ibid.: 202.

simply hinder and distort the singing without being understood as speech."[41] Wagner's final prescription for German opera singers is to focus solely on German Singspiel and opera.

Of course, in 1842, when Wagner arrived in Dresden, there were fewer German works – works that were German in nature, and not just in language – available to singers. Therefore, Wagner had to create a new style of opera. His first attempt at developing the German style was *Der fliegende Holländer*, which was written in 1840 and 1841. Wagner attempted to rid this work of traditional operatic elements: though there are numbers such as arias and choruses, the change from one number to the next is more fluid. Interestingly, Wagner assigned the title role not to a tenor, but to a bass-baritone. The Dutchman is a mysterious, troubled character who has been condemned to sail at sea, allowed to return to land once every seven years to seek redemption. Although this type of character would be sung by a Heldentenor in Wagner's later works, it seems that in order to break away from Italian and French molds, Wagner had to avoid the potential pitfalls of having a leading tenor. (Wagner's choice of a low-voice for the Dutchman could certainly have been affected by the works of Heinrich Marschner: in both *Der Vampyr* and *Hans Heiling*, the title characters are supernatural beings and are assigned to the baritone voice. Wagner would, however, return to the convention of the leading tenor in *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*.)

Those pitfalls, for Wagner, included making concessions for a star tenor such as cadenzas and high notes. As one can glean from his writings, Wagner believed those

[41] Ibid.: 203.

ostentatious bits of vocalism did not suit the German. In Wagner's operas, the leading tenor would therefore sing lower. Composers such as Rossini and Meyerbeer had their tenors sing higher and higher: Arnold, in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, has to sing high c´´ multiple times and Raoul, in Meyerebeer's *Les Huguenots*, must sing a high d-flat´´. This trend for higher singing, which can be found also in the works of Donizetti and Halévy, was probably supported by the success of Gilbert Duprez, who sang the first c´´ in chest voice on April 17, 1837 in a revival of *Guillaume Tell* at the Paris Opéra. Wagner associated these high notes with Paris and would have no part in this trend: Erik sings only one high b-flat´ and Tannhäuser and Lohengrin do not sing above a high a´, as is the case with most of Wagner's Heldentenor roles.

In addition to having his tenors sing lower, Wagner tried to dissolve the line between recitative and aria, something which one can observe in *Der fliegende Holländer* and can hear more readily in his later works. Wagner's vocal writing would become more declamatory and would consist of syllabic settings, as opposed to stretching one syllable over several notes. Therefore, the Heldentenor does not need to sing coloratura. Wagner would also eliminate word repetition and diminish the number of traditional operatic ensembles, particularly larger ensembles in which multiple characters sing different words at the same time. (Exceptions are found in *Die Meistersinger* and *Götterdämmerung*, both of which have several ensembles. After *Lohengrin*, however, the tenor does usually participate in such ensembles.) Wagner wanted the words of his libretti to be heard clearly, to be delivered as they would be in a spoken drama, in which word repetition would make little sense.

Since Wagner could not succeed in staging one of his operas in Paris, he had to search for a new location to make his mark. He left Paris on April 7, 1842, in order to travel to Dresden, where *Rienzi* would receive its premiere. Dresden was an ideal place for Wagner's works to be performed, for in that city there were two singers who were valuable to Wagner's cause: Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient and Joseph Tichatschek. The former's influence has already been discussed; the latter probably had a similar influence, for he was regarded as an exceptional singer (as shall be shown in Chapter Five) and Wagner wrote all but one of his mature operas after becoming intimately acquainted with his voice.

Tichatschek seems to have been the only tenor in Germany who was capable of dealing with the vocal demands of Rienzi. In a letter to his mother written on September 12, 1841, Wagner enthusiastically endorses the tenor: "But nowhere – not even at Berlin or Vienna – could I find a more excellent cast, than in Dresden, for the leading rôles of my Rienzi: the DEVRIENT and the TICHATSCHEK – I surely need say no more."[42] In 1868, in his homage to the late Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Wagner writes of Tichatschek: "If Nature in our times has wrought a miracle of beauty in the manly vocal organ, it is the tenor voice of *Tichatschek*, which for forty years has retained its strength and roundness."[43]

Wagner's first Heldentenor was regarded as phenomenal in terms of vocal brilliance and stamina, and not only by Wagner and contemporary Germans. Both Henry

[42] *Family Letters of Richard Wagner*., trans. William Ashton Ellis, ed. John Deathridge (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1991): 42.
[43] Wagner, "Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld," *Prose Works*, 4: 239.

Chorley and Hector Berlioz recorded similar comments about the great tenor. Surely Tichatschek's abilities influenced Wagner's Heldentenor writing, even if only to a small degree. Perhaps Tichatschek, who seems to have been capable of singing the most heroic tenor roles, gave Wagner the affirmation that his Heldentenor roles were capable of being sung. Perhaps it is also possible that Tichatschek gave Wagner unrealistic expectations as to what the tenor voice is capable of doing. At any rate, Tichatschek was Wagner's first Rienzi and Tannhäuser. He did not sing Erik, for, as Wagner himself recalled in his autobiography, in *Der fliegende Holländer* there was an "absence of a so-called heroic tenor role."[44]

Tannhäuser was Wagner's first post-Paris opera, the music of which was composed between 1843 and 1845. After its Dresden premiere on October 19, 1845, the opera struggled to achieve popularity until Franz Liszt arranged a production of it in Weimar in 1849. Wagner's next opera, *Lohengrin*, was composed primarily in 1846 and 1847, with its full score completed on April 28, 1848. This work, however, would not receive its premiere until August 28, 1850, when it was performed not in Dresden, but in Weimar. Wagner had to leave Dresden in 1849 because of his involvement in revolutionary activities there.

The roles of Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, though part of the Heldentenor repertory and very demanding, remain quite different from later Heldentenor roles such as Tristan and Siegfried. The vocal lines of these roles are still influenced by bel canto and both roles have a high tessitura, which often prevents some heavier Heldentenor voices from

[44] Wagner, *My Life*: 236.

singing these roles. Wagner would further develop his style of vocal writing, particularly for the tenor voice, in his later operas. Those next works, however, would come after several years in which Wagner would refrain from operatic composition. Five and one half years would pass between the completion of the *Lohengrin* score and the commencement of the draft of *Das Rheingold*. Wagner devoted much of this period to setting down his theories on opera in writing.

The Mature Heldentenor

Wagner arrived in Zurich in the summer of 1849, after fleeing Dresden, where a warrant for his arrest had been issued, for Wagner had played a role in the revolutionary activities in Dresden that May of that year.[45] During his exile in Zurich, Wagner wrote essays on opera and music. The first essay, *Art and Revolution*, was written in that same year. In it, Wagner discusses the corruption of art since the era of Greek drama, criticizes capitalism, and extols the transformative power of drama. The second essay, *The Artwork of the Future*, also written in 1849, concerns the importance of incorporating all the elements of art – music, poetry, dance, architecture, painting, etc. – into one perfect art form. These two essays were written in a utopian vein, in which Wagner views the theater in quasi-religious terms.

Wagner's longest and most famous theoretical essay of this time, *Opera and Drama*, sets forth his specific ideas concerning opera. Written in 1850 and 1851, much

[45] For a full discussion of Wagner's role in the Dresden uprising in 1849, see Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 2: 34-103.

of the essay concerns the relationship between words and music, as well as the relationship between voice and orchestra. Music, for Wagner, should always serve some dramatic purpose, and should arise out of the drama. The error of opera, Wagner writes famously, is that "a Means of expression (Music) has been made the end, while the End of expression (the Drama) has been made a means."[46] Opera has been perverted by the preeminence of the aria, which has become a "platform for the dexterity of the Singer's throat."[47] Composers merely aimed to please singers, and librettists wrote flimsy texts that could easily be set to music.

In *Opera and Drama* Wagner is very critical of both Rossini and Meyerbeer, the latter of whom was to be the object of his bitter wrath. Wagner writes that Rossini cared only for melody and the audience's applause. Wagner claims that Meyerbeer, as a Jew, had no native language and therefore did not care for a language's particular idiosyncrasies. According to Wagner, Meyerbeer used texts only to create effect and to be the "pliant servitor to Absolute Music."[48]

Wagner sought to create music drama that was very much the opposite of the situation as he perceived it. In addition to believing that music and poetry should be equal partners whose roles are to serve the drama, Wagner believed that vocal lines should be written in order to capture the natural stresses and accents of speech. Wagner also outlines other developments that will be found in his later works: the vocal melody

[46] Wagner, *Opera and Drama*: 17.
[47] Ibid.: 18.
[48] Ibid.: 87. Wagner's anti-Semitic views, which will not be discussed here, can be found in Richard Wagner, *Judaism in Music and Other Essays* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1894 [repr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995]) and an in-depth examination of them can be found in Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*.

will not be found in the orchestra, which is no longer mere accompaniment; choruses and other ensembles will be used only in rare cases.

Wagner's most demanding scores, particularly for the Heldentenor, were written after this period during which he refrained from operatic composition and refined his theories. During these five and half years between *Lohengrin* and *Das Rheingold*, Wagner retreated into the theoretical realm and gave less regard for popular opinion and traditional operatic conventions. Newman writes:

> In those five years the relatively naïve Wagner of the earlier years, working his troubled way through various fields with only a dim consciousness of whither he was tending and what would be the end of it all, gradually hardens into a domineering spirit that has taken full stock of itself, realises its fundamental difference from the rest of mankind, becomes perfectly clear as to its pre-appointed goal, and makes for that goal without a moment's self-doubt, a moment's compromise, a moment's consideration for others.[49]

It is possible that during this time of exile, when Wagner was removed from the day-to-day life of the opera house, he wrote pieces in which he did not consider the abilities of the performers, but rather wrote in an idealistic manner. In other words, while writing such works as *Tristan und Isolde* and *Siegfried*, he probably did not consider whether the tenors singing the title characters might not have the stamina to sing the entirety of the opera. It is possible that Wagner was simply not aware of the strain that these roles would place on singers' voices. His pursuit of his artistic goals overshadowed all considerations of practicality. Wagner possibly acknowledged as much when he

[49] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, II: 278.

spoke of *Tristan* to Cosima, in 1878: "I don't know what devil it was that drove me to produce such stuff – it was the music, which came welling like that out of the subject."[50] The difficult nature of Wagner's later works may reflect his lack of consideration for the performers' tasks.

The first tenor role that Wagner wrote after this period was Loge in *Das Rheingold*, composed in 1853 and 1854 and the first work of the *Ring*. Loge, like Erik, is not a true Heldentenor role; though the role is important and one of the longest in the opera, Loge is a character role, for he is neither a leading romantic figure nor a hero along the lines of Siegmund and Siegfried. The range of the role is relatively narrow, from low C to high g′, and the vocal writing presents few of the typical challenges of a Heldentenor role: it does not require tremendous stamina or much strenuous singing. One thing the vocal writing does, however, is capture the natural speech patterns of German. This declamatory vocal writing is something that distinguishes Wagner's later works from his earlier ones.

The next Heldentenor role that Wagner wrote was Siegmund in *Die Walküre*, the second work of the *Ring*. This role features the lowest tessitura of all the Heldentenor roles. Most of Siegmund's singing comes in the first act. As Plácido Domingo bluntly stated, in Act I Siegmund must do "a hell of a lot of singing!"[51] That is something that most of the Heldentenor roles require, particularly Wagner's next two tenor heroes: Tristan and Siegfried, which are considered the most difficult Heldentenor roles.

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[50] Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 2: 67.
[51] Domingo and Matheopoulos, *My Operatic Roles*: 224.

Wagner's later Heldentenor roles share almost nothing in common with bel canto and French Grand Opera tenor roles. Even the most lyric of Wagner's Heldentenor roles, Walther in *Die Meistersinger*, does not resemble Italian and French counterparts. Therefore, he succeeded in creating a new type of voice that was distinctly German, and not based on foreign models. In the next chapter, an analysis of each Heldentenor role will be presented, demonstrating both the difficulties of each role and the reasons why these roles are so different from their French and Italian counterparts.

Though Wagner departed from foreign models, he continued to admire the positive attributes of Italian singers. Cosima's diaries contain some of Wagner's most candid remarks, comments that he would not broadcast to the world in his published writings. One of Cosima's entries, from August 3, 1872, sums up Wagner's love-hate relationship with Italian music: "R. sings a cantilena from *I Puritani* and remarks that Bellini wrote melodies lovelier than one's dreams. The melody recalls Rubini to him, how wonderfully he sang it, and he observes: 'Our German singers have to go about it in an entirely different way, because they have not got this gift.'"[52]

[52] Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 1: 519.

Chapter Three: Analyzing the Roles

Obviously, it is easy to make generalizations about Wagnerian tenor roles. The myths thus created concerning these Heldentenor roles stem from an incomplete understanding of these roles, or because the creator of the myth has an agenda. Only when the roles are viewed afresh can a more objective understanding of these roles be acquired.

In order to acquire a better understanding of the Heldentenor, each of the main tenor roles from Wagner's operas, from *Rienzi* to *Parsifal*, will be examined.[1] Steuermann, Froh, Mime, David, and the rest of the supporting tenor roles will not be discussed here. Greater emphasis will be placed on the most demanding of the Heldentenor roles, such as Tristan and Siegfried. Each of the roles will be analyzed in terms of overall length, pacing (how much singing is required in each scene or each act), vocal range, tessitura, the nature of the vocal line, orchestration, and any other particular demands made on the Heldentenor. While this analysis should erase some of the misconceptions regarding these roles, it will also raise other issues that will be discussed in the final chapter.

Rienzi

Rienzi is the story of a papal notary who is involved in political intrigue in Rome, eventually dying with his sister Irene when he is attacked by enemies made during the course of the drama. Although *Rienzi* was written in the French Grand Opera style, the title character does bear some resemblance to later Heldentenor roles, particularly earlier

[1] *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot* will not be considered, for they are hardly staples of the operatic repertory, nor were they sung by the famous Heldentenors of Wagner's day. *Die Feen* was first performed in Munich in 1888, over fifty years after its composition, and *Das Liebesverbot* was poorly received in Magdeburg in 1836.

ones such as Tannhäuser and Lohengrin. Rienzi is almost as demanding as those later roles, particularly because of its length, and it requires an exceptionally talented tenor (such as Joseph Tichatschek, who will be discussed at length in the next chapter). It may come as a surprise to some to learn that the role of Rienzi is longer than all the Wagnerian tenor roles with the exception of Siegfried (in *Siegfried*, not in *Götterdämmerung*) and Tristan.

The tenor singing an uncut performance of Rienzi must sing for over fifty minutes.[2] This role is considerably longer than any previous tenor role. For example, Tamino in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* must sing for less than twenty minutes[3] and even Arnold in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, a very long opera of approximately four hours, sings for less than forty minutes.[4] While French Grand Operas tend to be long, in total duration, none of Meyerbeer's tenor roles are as long as Rienzi; Jean de Leyden, for example, sings approximately thirty-five minutes of music in *Le Prophète*.[5] Enée, the

[2] The total time of Rienzi's music, recorded by stopwatch, amounts to fifty-one minutes and twenty-eight seconds. This timing was made by listening to the only commercial recording of the opera: Heinrich Hollreiser, dir., *Rienzi*, by Richard Wagner, Staatskapelle Dresden, EMI 7 63981. This time does not include instrumental passages or other characters' vocal lines, unless they are singing at the same time as Rienzi. This timing does, however, include short rests, such as eighth and quarter rests. The recordings chosen for this chapter are representative recordings of these operas. Recordings by many of the famous Wagnerian conductors of the last fifty years have been chosen, so that conductors such as Wilhelm Furtwängler, Sir Georg Solti, Herbert von Karajan, James Levine, and Daniel Barenboim are represented. Different recordings of any given opera will vary in length, of course, so the timings given in this chapter are not meant to be absolute. Instead, these timings are general guidelines for the length of each role.

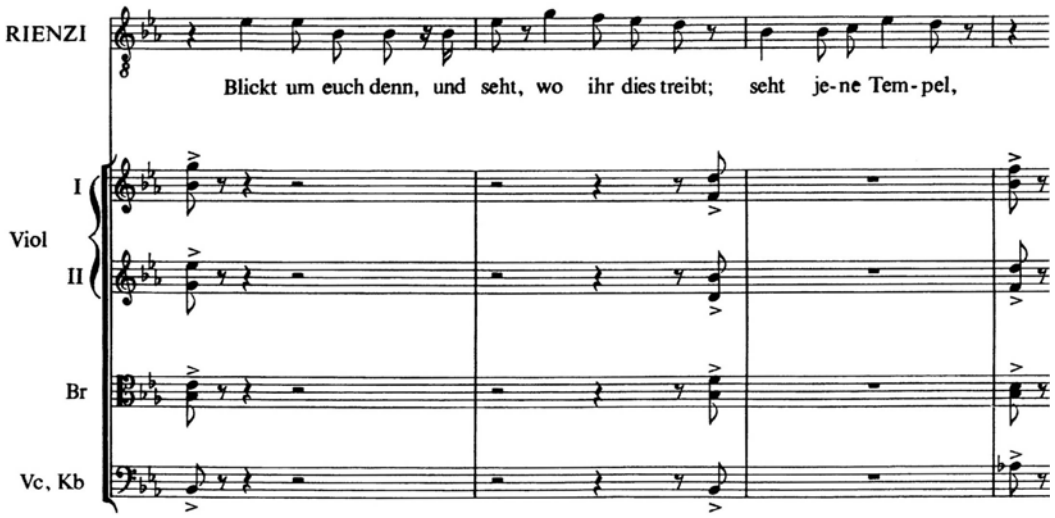
[3] Eighteen minutes and forty seconds, in Karl Böhm, dir., *Die Zauberflöte*, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Berlin Philharmoniker, Deutsche Grammophon 449 749-2. The total length of this recording is two hours, twenty-seven minutes, and twenty-six seconds.

[4] Thirty-seven minutes and forty-four seconds, in Lamberto Gardelli, dir., *Guillaume Tell*, by Gioachino Rossini, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, EMI Classics 7 69951 2. The total length of the opera on this recording is three hours, fifty-seven minutes, and forty seconds.

[5] The timing of Jean's music, with a few relatively short cuts, is thirty-two minutes and three seconds in Henry Lewis, dir., *Le Prophète*, by Giacomo Meyerbeer, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, CBS M3K 34340. The total length of this recording is three hours, twenty-one minutes, and forty-seven seconds.

central character in Hector Berlioz's famously long *Les Troyens*, sings for less than thirty-two minutes.[6]

Yet, although Rienzi is one of the longest tenor roles, it is not as demanding as Siegfried or Tristan, or probably even Siegmund or Lohengrin. A great deal of Rienzi's singing is done in lightly-accompanied recitative or in ensembles. In recitative, the singer does need to sing out with his full voice, particularly when that recitative is relatively unsupported by the orchestra (see Example 1). Wagner, for the most part, ceased to write this type of recitative, in which the orchestra is often tacit, after *Rienzi*. In ensembles, the singer has the benefit of being supported by other singers and, if the singer tires in large ensembles, he can conserve his voice without the audience being aware of it.



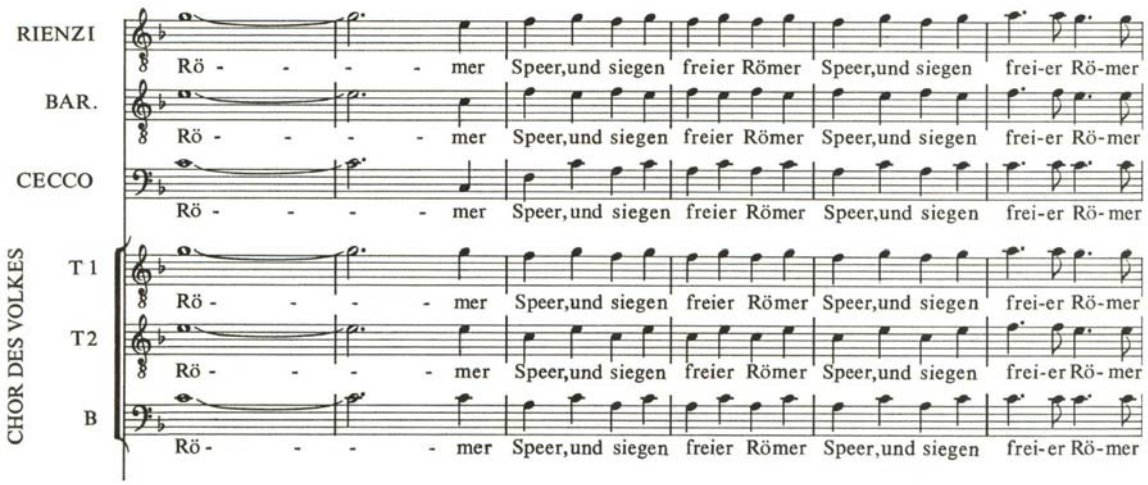
Example 1: Act I of *Rienzi*, mm. 166-168.

[6] Thirty-one minutes and forty-four seconds, actually, in Sir Colin Davis, dir., *Les Troyens*, by Hector Berlioz, Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Philips 416 432-2. The total length of this recording is three hours, fifty-nine minutes, and fifty-six seconds.

One other factor works in the tenor's favor in *Rienzi*: the title character's music is well distributed throughout the five acts. Most of the singing is done in the first, second, and fifth acts, allowing the tenor more time to rest in the third and fourth acts, in preparation for Rienzi's aria in the fifth act. Even within the acts in which he sings the most, Rienzi has time for rest; in Act II, he sings in the first and third scenes, but not in the second; in Act V, he does not sing in the third scene, allowing him to rest for the fourth and final scene.

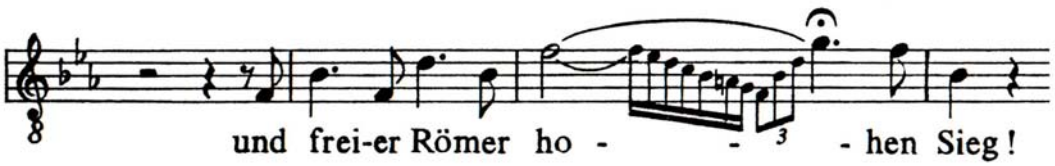
The vocal range of the role is not remarkable: Rienzi must sing from (low) d to (high) a′, an octave plus one fifth.[7] Most French Grand Opera roles encompass two octaves, and Arnold in *Guillaume Tell* must sing from a low B-flat (albeit one sung in a unison ensemble) up to a c-sharp″. Though Rienzi does not sing above a′, he must sing high notes often, and the role has an overall high tessitura. Rienzi sings a′ thirty-three times and a-flat′ or g-sharp′ forty-seven times, while he must sing d only four times. Rienzi would not be a role suited for the baritonal Heldentenor, for the tessitura would prove to be too high. That is particularly true in ensembles, when the vocal writing sits rather high (Example 2).

[7] The notation for pitch used here is the same used in *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Michael Randel (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard, 1986). Thus, middle C is designated c′ and the C below middle C is designated c. A high A for a tenor is noted as a′ while the D below middle C is noted d.



Example 2: Act III of *Rienzi*, mm. 271-276.

Rienzi's vocal line differs from the Heldentenor roles found in Wagner's later operas, for it is often more lyrical, featuring melodies that move by step. Though Rienzi has declamatory moments, they do not occur as frequently as in *Tristan* or *Siegfried*. The tenor who sings Rienzi must have an agile voice, for Rienzi has many turns (prominently featured in his Act V aria, "Allmächt'ger Vater"), grace notes, and even a bit of coloratura (Example 3).

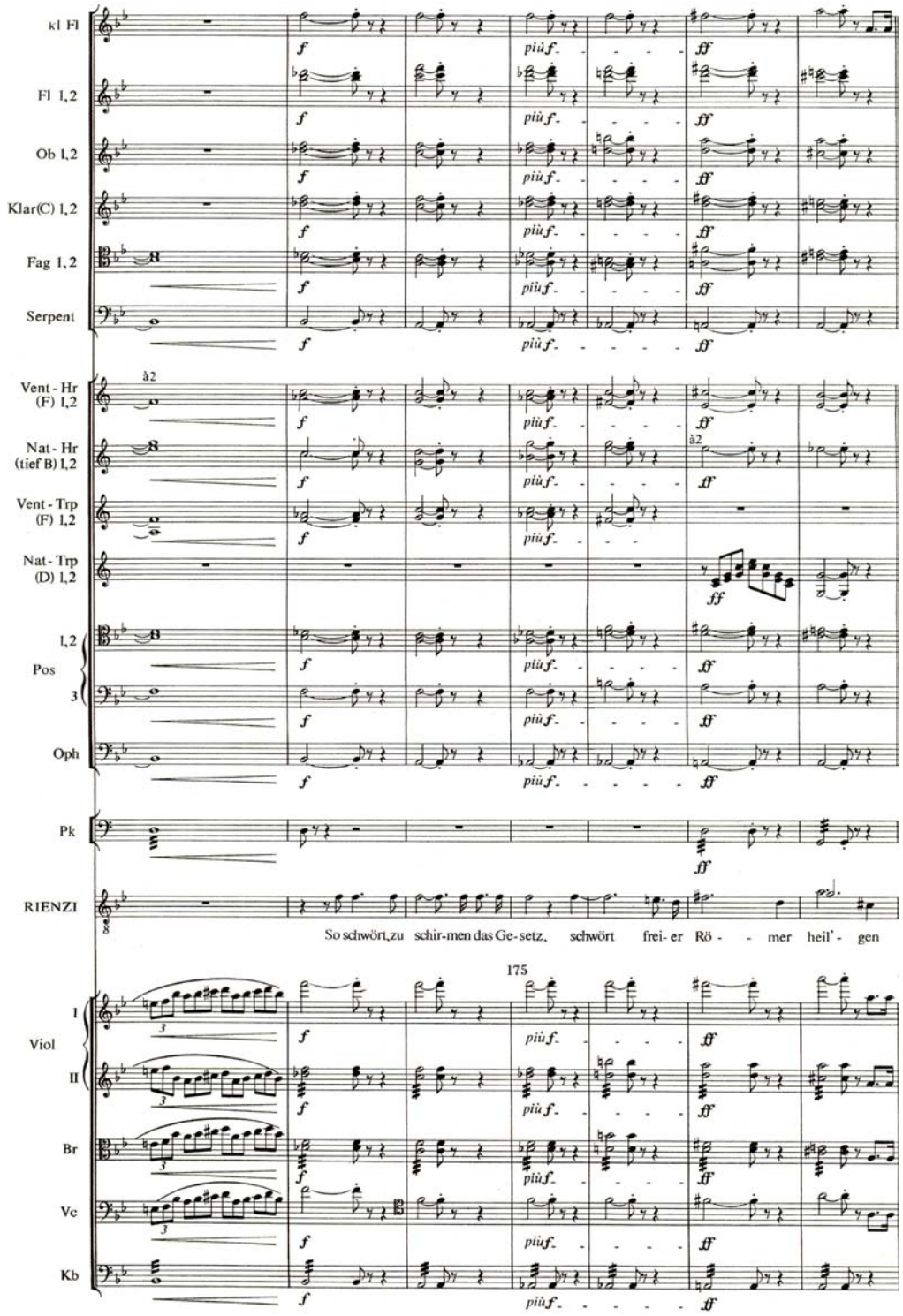


Example 3: Act III of *Rienzi*, mm. 174-177.

The orchestration of *Rienzi* is not unusual for a work written in the French Grand Opera style. It requires three flutes, three piccolos, two oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, one contrabassoon, four horns (two valve and two natural), four trumpets (two

valve and two natural), three trombones, one tuba, one harp, strings, and percussion: timpani, bass drum, cymbal, side drum, tenor drum, tam-tam, and triangle. While the opera requires more percussion than most opera orchestras, the various drums are appropriate for the marshal qualities of the score. As for the winds and brass, *Rienzi* has one more flute, two more piccolos, one more clarinet, and one more bassoon than *Guillaume Tell* has. Though the score of *Rienzi* has a tuba, and *Guillaume Tell* does not, Rossini's opera has an English horn, whereas Wagner's opera does not.

Wagner's orchestra does not test the tenor in *Rienzi* in the way it does in *Tristan* or *Siegfried*. Usually the full wind, brass, and string forces are unleashed at *forte* or *fortissimo* only at moments when the singers are at rest or at key dramatic moments, such as in the finale of Act I (Example 4), and even then not every instrument is involved: the harp and most of the percussion do not play during this passage. Generally, the greatest concern for a tenor singing Rienzi is not the orchestra or the vocal range, but rather its great length.

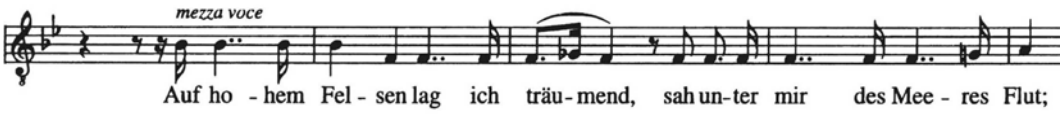


Example 4: Act I of *Rienzi*, mm. 172-178.

Erik

Wagner's next opera does not feature a tenor as its central male character. *Der fliegende Holländer*, of course, is far more concerned with its title character, the mysterious Dutchman, than Erik, Senta's suitor. This role is therefore fittingly short, requiring less than fifteen minutes of singing,[8] which should come as no surprise, since Erik enters into the action only halfway through the opera. The role is not long and its music is evenly distributed between the second and third acts, so the pacing of the role is not an issue.

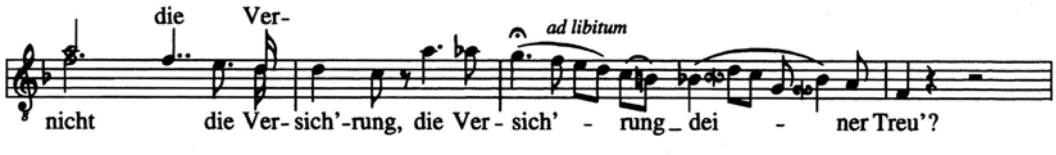
The vocal range of the role is slightly larger than that of Rienzi. Erik sings from d-flat to b-flat′, a note he sings only once. The overall tessitura of the role is fairly high, much like Rienzi, Tannhäuser, and Lohengrin. (Erik sings one eighth note b-flat′, a′ nine times, and a-flat′ or g-sharp′ eleven times.) The exception to this high tessitura comes at the most interesting moment of Erik's role, the recollection of his dream in Act II ("Auf hohem Felsen lag' ich träumend"), which is centered on f (Example 5). Erik sings four d-flats in this passage. This passage is remarkable for its lack of melodiousness, irregular phrasing, and focus on the text. This type of vocal writing is a precursor to the type of narratives found in *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*.



Example 5: Act II of *Der fliegende Holländer*, mm. 253-257.

[8] Thirteen minutes and forty-two seconds, in James Levine, dir., *Der fliegende Holländer*, by Richard Wagner, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Sony Classical S2K 66342. The total length of this recording is two hours, thirty-two minutes, and seven seconds.

In the drama of *Der fliegende Holländer*, Erik represents for Senta an alternative to the unconventional character of the Dutchman. Accordingly, most of his music is fairly conventional in phrasing and contour, particularly the aria-like solo passage he sings in his Act II duet with Senta and his Act III cavatina. Werner Breig writes: "Erik's arioso numbers in acts 2 and 3. . . remain firmly within the conventions of opera."[9] In his Act II duet with Senta, Erik's arioso passage, "Mein Herz voll Treue bis zum Sterben," moves by step, is divided into regular four-measure phrases, and is replete with turns and grace notes. This duet has a high tessitura, much like Erik's cavatina, "Willst jenes Tag's du nicht dich mehr entsinnen." The cavatina features two-measure phrases, stepwise and triadic movement, turns, and a cadenza (Example 6). Though the solo seems rather conventional, including the arpeggiated accompaniment in the strings, it does feature some hallmarks of Wagner's compositional style, including modulations (from the tonic of F major to D-flat major to D major before returning to F) and a relentless use of the voice: Erik has little time to rest once he begins singing, and the tessitura becomes quite high, making this solo rather difficult to sing.



Example 6: Act III of *Der fliegende Holländer*, mm. 136-139.

As in *Rienzi*, at no point in the opera does the orchestration threaten to overpower the singer performing the role of Erik. The score of the opera requires actually fewer

[9] Werner Breig, "The Musical Works," trans. Paul Knight and Horst Loeschmann, in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. John Deathridge (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992): 416.

instruments: only one piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns (two valve and two natural), two trumpets, three bassoons, tuba, timpani, and strings. Usually when Erik sings, the orchestra is rather reserved, saving its power for when the Dutchman sings, or for the orchestral passages and the end of the opera.[10]

Though Erik is many ways a conventional romantic tenor, Wagner did not want the role to be sung in a sappy way: "Nor must *Eric* be a sentimental whiner: on the contrary, he is stormy, impulsive and sombre (*düster*), like every man who lives alone (particularly in the Northern highlands). Whoever should give a sugar rendering to his '*Cavatina*' in the Third Act, would do me a sorry service, for it ought instead to breathe distress and heart-ache."[11]

Tannhäuser

Tannhäuser is the first of Wagner's tenor roles which may rightly be called a Heldentenor role, for in addition to being a long role (though not as long as Rienzi), it makes great demands on the singer, particularly in terms of acting. This role requires a type of emotional intensity not present in any other tenor role outside of Verdi's Otello and Wagner's own Tristan. Eduard Hanslick, writing for the *Wiener Musikzeitung* in 1846, understood the intensity of the role: "As for the voices, only the role of Tannhäuser demands exceptional strength and endurance. What makes it so strenuous is the continuous psychic agitation, against which the protagonist can hardly protect himself."[12]

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[10] Wagner made revisions to the opera, primarily the orchestration, in 1846, 1852, and 1860. These changes did not change affect the role of Erik. For more information on these revisions, see Isolde Vetter, *'Der fliegende Holländer' von Richard Wagner: Entstehung, Bearbeitung, Überlieferung* (Ph.D. diss., Technical University of Berlin, 1982).

[11] Wagner, "Remarks on Performing the Opera: 'The Flying Dutchman,'" *Judaism in Music and Other Essays*: 216-7. (Original emphasis and translator's spelling of the character name.)

[12] Hanslick, "Tannhäuser," in *Hanslick's Musical Criticisms*: 45.

Wagner himself understood the challenges that he presented to the tenor singing Tannhäuser:

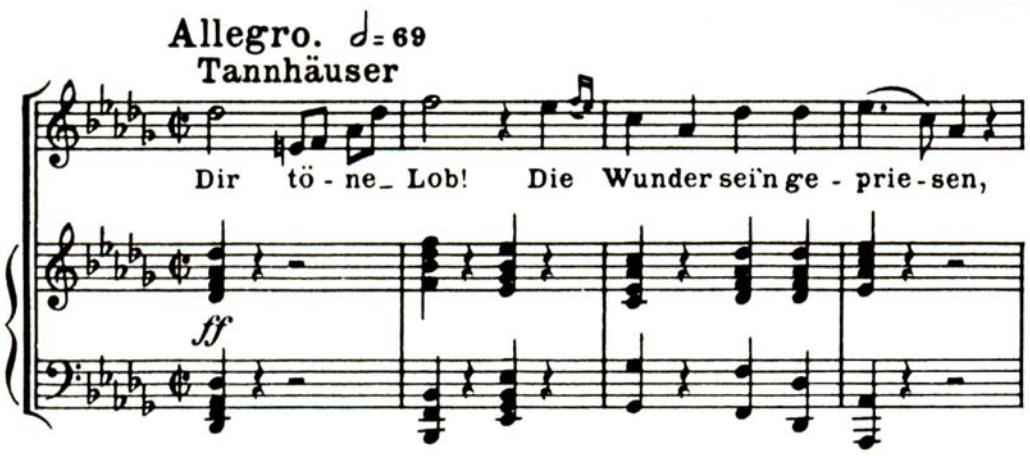
> Indisputably the hardest rôle is that of *Tannhäuser* himself, and I must admit that it may be one of the hardest problems ever set before an actor. The essentials of this character, in my eyes, are an ever prompt and active, nay, a brimming-over saturation with the emotion woken by the passing incident, and the lively contrasts which the swift changes of situation produce in the utterance of this fill of feeling. Tannhäuser is nowhere and never 'a little' anything, but each thing fully and entirely.[13]

This role is such an emotionally intense role because Tannhäuser is torn between two extremes: a life of sensuality with Venus and a pure life with Elisabeth and his fellow minstrels. This emotional polarization is captured in writing of this role and it must be executed by the Heldentenor performing it. Musically, Tannhäuser's inner demons are characterized by a high tessitura and a type of relentlessness that can be found particularly in his Act III Rome Narration.

As stated above, this role is not longer than Rienzi; with approximately thirty-five minutes of music, Tannhäuser is also shorter than Lohengrin, Siegfried, and Tristan.[14] Tannhäuser's music is divided evenly among the three acts, and he has substantial time for rest in Act II (scenes i and iii) and Act III (scenes i and ii). Much of his singing is captured in his Hymn to Venus, three verses of which he sings in Act I, scene ii; he sings the fourth verse in Act II, scene iv, in the song contest. The first verse is in D-flat major and the subsequent verses are set in D, E-flat, and finally E major, thus creating a sense of increasing tension. The verses also become more heavily scored: the first verse is accompanied only by harp (Example 7) while the fourth is accompanied by a full

[13] Wagner, "On the Performing of 'Tannhäuser'," *Judaism in Music*: 198.
[14] Tannhäuser sings for thirty-five minutes and thirteen seconds in Sir Georg Solti, dir., *Tannhäuser*, by Richard Wagner, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, London 414 581-2. The total length of this recording is three hours, seven minutes, and thirty-nine seconds.

complement of strings, oboes, clarinets, natural French horns, bassoons, and harp. Tannhäuser also sings in long ensembles at the end of Acts I and II and in his narrative in Act III.[15]



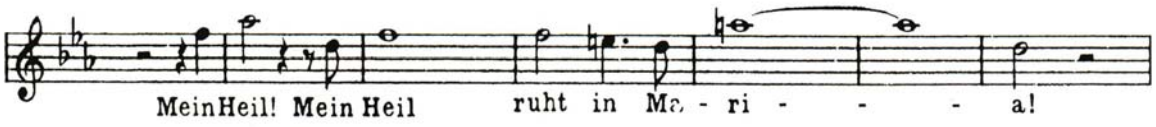
Example 7: Act I, scene ii of *Tannhäuser*, mm. 108-111.[16]

The vocal range of the role is the same as that of Rienzi, from d to a′. Tannhäuser's tessitura is just as high, if not higher, than Rienzi's: he sings a′ twenty-nine times and a-flat′ or g-sharp′ seventy-four times, versus only four d's and two e-flats. The tessitura of the role rises as the climax of each act approaches, which is generally true of

[15] *Tannhäuser* underwent a few revisions from Wagner after its premiere in Dresden in 1845. There are essentially four different versions of the work. The second version, known as the "Dresden version," incorporates changes made to the score after its premiere in Dresden. The fourth version, known as the "Paris version," includes changes made after the Paris performances in 1861. Modern performances usually use a combination of these two versions. With regards to the role of Tannhäuser, the "Dresden version" is often performed, with the use of the Paris version of Act I, scene two and the Paris Act II, scene four. The Dover edition of the full score (New York: Dover Publications, 1984) includes the Paris variants of those scenes in a supplement. The Solti recording of the opera uses the "Paris version" variants. For more information on Wagner's revisions, see Geoffrey Skelton, "I Still Owe the World *Tannhäuser*: The Dresden and Paris versions," *Wagner in Thought and Practice* (London: Lime Tree, 1991): 143-181, and Carolyn Abbate, "The Parisian *Tannhäuser*" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1984.)

[16] The measure numbers presented in the *Tannhäuser* examples are taken from the so-called "Paris version" of the opera. The measure numbers are for each scene, as opposed to each act. The measure numbers provided for all the examples outside of *Tannhäuser* are the measure numbers for each act.

Heldentenor roles. (Example 8 shows Tannhäuser's appeal to Mary at the end of the Venusberg scene in Act I.) The only time Tannhäuser approaches a baritone range is in the third act, when he encounters Wolfram, yet that passage does not last long and soon he is singing above the staff.

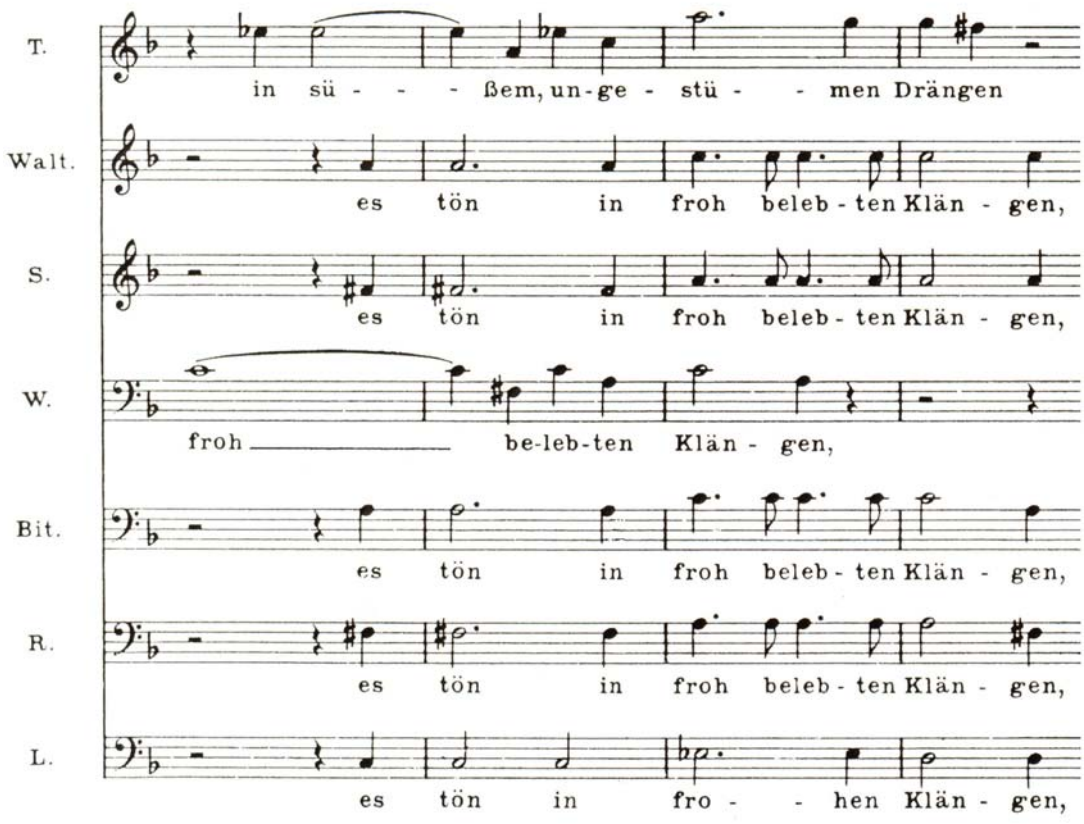


Example 8: Act I, scene ii of *Tannhäuser*, mm. 755-761.

In *Tannhäuser*, there are some new features in the tenor role, ones that are found in subsequent tenor roles that Wagner wrote. For instance, there are fewer moments of what can be called recitative, which Wagner himself noted: "In my opera there exists no distinction between so-called 'declaimed' phrases and phrases 'sung,' but my declamation is song withal, and my song declamation."[17] Though there are moments that are recitative-like, they are not accompanied by static chords in the orchestra. Also, though Tannhäuser sings in ensembles, he has a more independent vocal line than Rienzi has in similar situations. (Example 9 shows Tannhäuser's vocal line in an Act I, scene iv ensemble.) In fact, Wagner wanted Tannhäuser's vocal line to dominate the large ensemble at the end of Act II, beginning with "Zum Heil den Sündigen zu führen." He was even willing to have Tannhäuser sing alone, thus cutting the other ensemble members' vocal lines for twenty measures.[18]

[17] Wagner, "On the Performing of Tannhäuser," *Judaism in Music*: 174.
[18] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, III: 89.

Another feature of Tannhäuser's vocal lines that is found in the other Heldentenor roles is the singing of high notes that are sustained for long periods of time, sometimes for as long as two measures (as can be seen in Example 8 and, to a lesser extent, Example 9). Sometimes these climactic high notes are approached by large intervals, such as octaves or fifths. The octave leap, in this case upward, is also another feature of Heldentenor roles, one that makes these roles difficult to sing. High notes of long duration, approached by large intervals, often cause a singer to push his voice in an effort to create a weightier, more dramatic sound on the high note. Leaps to high notes appear in all of the later Heldentenor roles.



Example 9: Act I, scene iv of *Tannhäuser*, mm. 274-277.

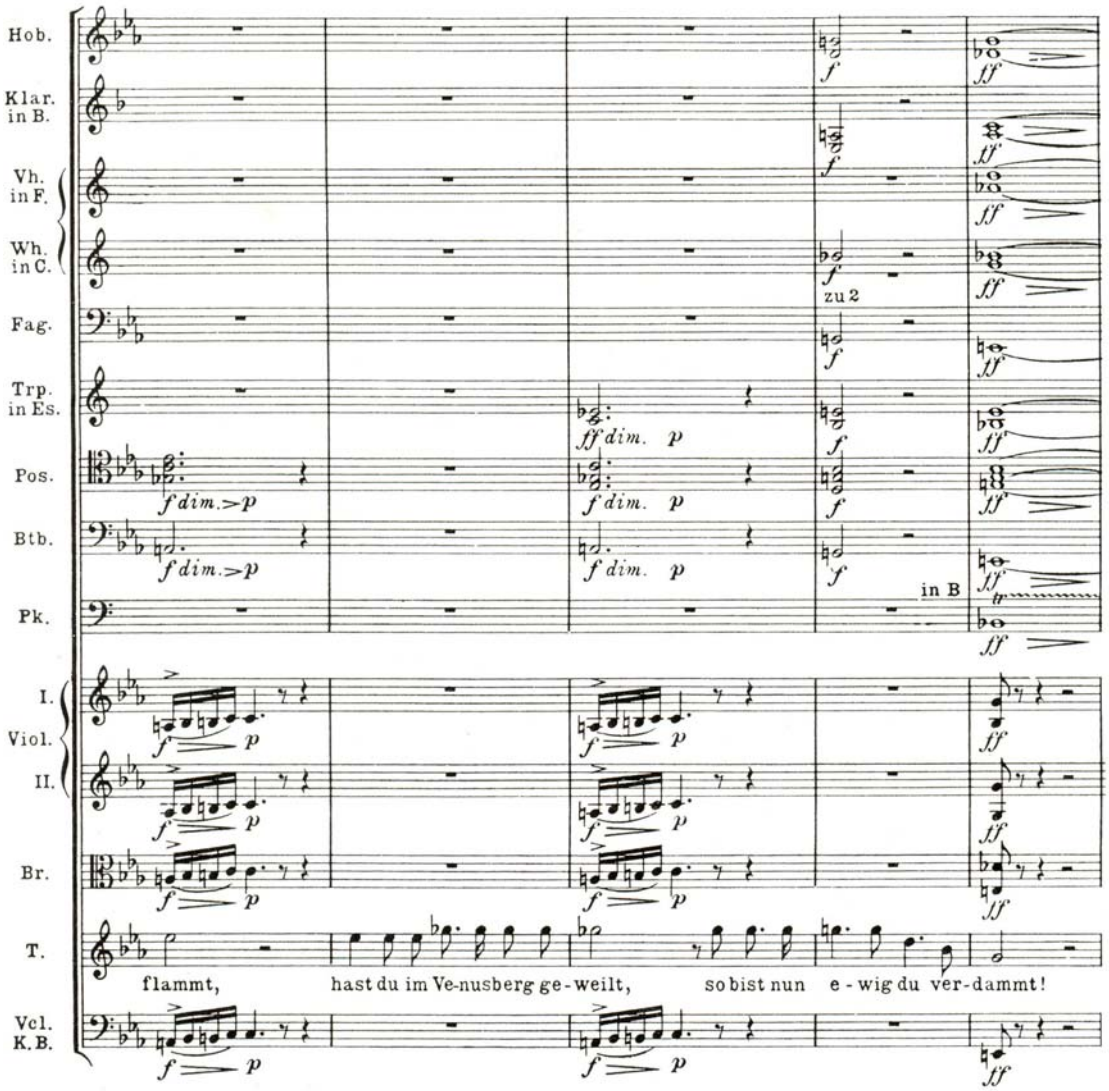
Though the singer performing Tannhäuser must execute such dramatic vocal tasks, not all of his singing is devoted to sustained notes and declamatory outbursts. Tannhäuser's vocal line requires an agile voice, particularly in his Hymn to Venus, which requires grace notes and the ability to negotiate phrases that quickly ascend over an octave (as can be seen above in Example 7). Agility is also required for both Siegfrieds.

Probably the most progressive aspect of *Tannhäuser* is the Rome Narration in Act III. Barry Millington calls this passage "the longest and most advanced dramatic recitative (one might equally call it 'arioso') in any of the works before *Opera and Drama*."[19] What makes this narration advanced is its attention to the text. As Tannhäuser recalls his pilgrimage to Rome and the Pope's condemnation of him, the music adapts to each emotion. The tessitura therefore rises and falls as various histrionic peaks and valley are reached. This aspect of the narration, as well as its length and the prominent role the orchestra plays in it, makes it difficult for a Heldentenor to sing.

Though the orchestra used in *Tannhäuser* is no larger than the one employed in *Rienzi*, Wagner uses it towards more dramatic ends, particularly in the Rome Narration. Here, the orchestra is more involved: the strings surge and the winds and brass punctuate key dramatic moments. Usually Wagner does not have the full orchestra play while characters are singing. Instead, he has the full orchestra play only on key words, or at times when the singer is at rest. One such moment is the Pope's condemnation of Tannhäuser, "so bist du nun ewig verdammt!" At this moment, almost all of the instruments play *fortissimo* (the flutes, piccolo, harp, and various percussion instruments do not play) while Tannhäuser sings a g (Example 10).

[19] Millington, *Wagner*: 176.

This passage also requires the singer to ascend chromatically through the *passaggio*, the zone in which he makes the transition between middle and high registers. Prior to the passage in Example 10, Tannhäuser must climb from d-sharp′ to g′. The negotiation of the *passaggio* is difficult for the singer and often becomes tiring, yet it is something that occurs frequently in Wagner's Heldentenor roles.



Example 10: Act III, scene iii of *Tannhäuser*, mm. 231-235.

Lohengrin

Whereas the role of Tannhäuser requires searing intensity, the role of Lohengrin, a knight of the Holy Grail, requires sensitivity and a good deal of singing at softer dynamics. There are some declamatory moments but this role requires the ability to sing legato and to sing tenderly. Both of those qualities are usually not associated with the Heldentenor. Italian tenors have often been attracted to Lohengrin; Enrico Caruso sang the role, in Italian, in Buenos Aires in 1901.[20] Aureliano Pertile (1885 – 1952), another Italian tenor, sang Lohegrin at La Scala and the role also belongs to Plácido Domingo's repertory. Usually there are two types of tenors who sing Lohengrin: the traditional Heldentenor, who is suited to the more dramatic moments of the opera, and the lyric tenor (or *lirico spinto* tenor), who can more aptly handle the high, soft singing.

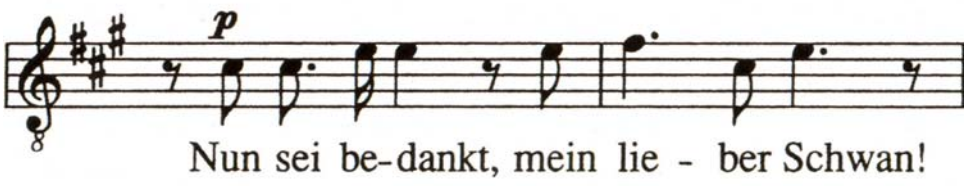
Domingo offers his own insight into the role: "The role of Lohengrin, although not exactly a bel canto part, is nevertheless a very Italianate part in terms of the amount of light you have to let into your voice. It needs a superb legato line and great sweetness of tone. But there are certain passages. . . where you need that special sort of Wagnerian 'bite' in the way you enunciate and sing the words."[21] It is the blend of the lyric and dramatic that makes Lohengrin unique and also quite difficult for Heldentenors. The role is also the third longest of the Heldentenor roles (Rienzi not included): he sings for over forty minutes, most of which comes in the third act.[22]

The vocal range of Lohengrin is similar to the previous roles: d-flat to a′. However, he must sing the d-flat once, and only one e-flat, while he sings a′ twenty-nine

[20] Fischer, "*Sprechgesang* or Bel Canto," in *Wagner Handbook*: 542.
[21] Domingo and Matheopoulos, *My Operatic Roles*: 115.
[22] The total timing is forty-one minutes and fifty-nine seconds (twenty-six minutes and twenty-six seconds of which comes in Act III) in Sir Georg Solti, dir., *Lohengrin*, by Richard Wagner, Wiener Philharmonic, London 421 053-2. The total length of this recording is three hours, forty-two minutes, and forty-six seconds.

times. Therefore, one can see that like the preceding roles, the tessitura of Lohengrin is high. Yet it is not the number of high notes, but the type of phrases that he sings, that makes the role difficult.

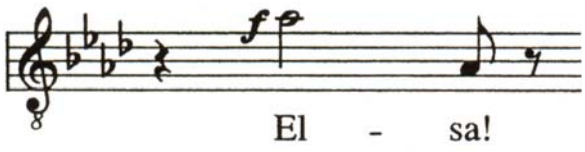
Like Tannhäuser, Lohengrin must sing often in the passaggio range, between e-flat′ and f-sharp′. Unlike Tannhäuser, he must often sing in this area at softer dynamic levels and at slower tempi. Lohengrin's first entrance, in the third scene of Act I, illustrates the type of singing he must do elsewhere in the opera (Example 11). Lohengrin sings with such tenderness at his first entrance in Act I; at the beginning of the second scene of Act III, when in the bridal chamber with Elsa; for much of his narrative in the last scene, "In fernem Land;" and during his final address to the swan, "Mein lieber Schwan!"



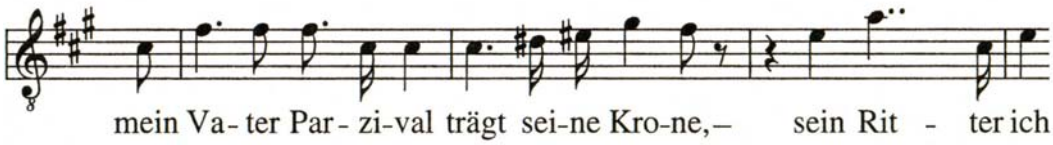
Example 11: Act I, scene iii of *Lohengrin*, mm. 691-692.

Lohengrin must also sing with a great deal of strength throughout the opera. During his altercations with Telramund and when Elsa presses him about his identity, Lohengrin must trumpet out powerful high notes. (One example from Act I, scene three can be seen in Example 12.) He often approaches high A's and A-flats (often sung at *forte*) by the interval of a perfect fourth, which should come as no surprise since the theme of the Holy Grail has a prominent leap upward of a fourth. (Example 13 shows

such a leap, this time in "In fernem Land.") These dramatic moments, in order to be properly realized, require a singer who has a reserve of vocal strength.



Example 12: Act I, scene iii of *Lohengrin*, m. 786.

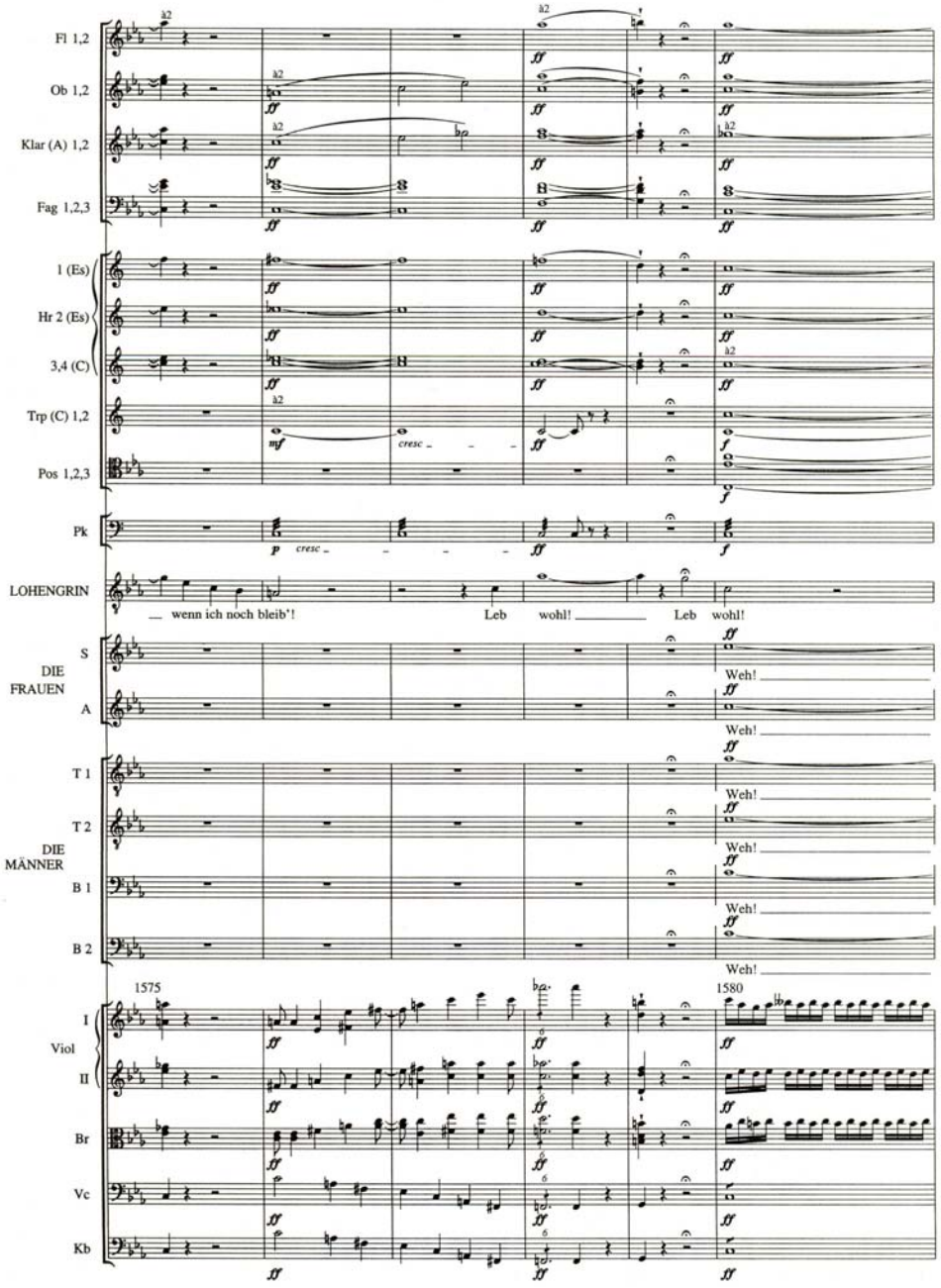


Example 13: Act III, scene iii of *Lohengrin*, mm. 1275-1279.

As stated earlier, most of Lohengrin's music comes in Act III (the music of which, as it happens, Wagner composed first). Approximately two-thirds of his music is sung in that act, in the last two scenes. The second scene of this act is the bridal chamber scene with Elsa. This long scene, shared only by those two characters, culminates in Lohengrin's killing of Telramund. The third scene includes the lengthy "In fernem Land," as well as outbursts of disappointment with Elsa and his farewell.

Another difficulty facing the singer who performs Lohengrin is the orchestra. Though it is not any larger than the one used for *Tannhäuser*, Wagner uses more of the instruments to accompany Lohengrin, particularly in dramatic high notes sung in the last act. Though Wagner does not accompany entire phrases that Lohengrin sings with the full forces of the orchestra, he consistently uses the full orchestra to accompany those

climactic high notes, as can be see in Example 14, when Lohengrin bids farewell to Elsa. This increased use of the orchestra looks ahead to Wagner's later scores.



Example 14: Act III, scene iii of *Lohengrin*, mm. 1575-1580.

Tristan

Nothing could have prepared Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld for the role of Tristan, which he premiered in 1865, fifteen years after *Lohengrin* received its debut in Weimar. Tristan is quite simply the longest tenor role in the entire operatic repertory and its sheer length is stunning: Tristan must sing almost an hour's worth of music, while Verdi's Otello, perhaps the most demanding role in the Italian repertory, must sing for approximately thirty minutes.[23] Not only is the role excessive in length, but it requires singing over an orchestra that is used in a different manner than before. Wagner's orchestra, while not technically larger, is more complex and plays the leitmotifs that often communicate the drama as much as the singers' words do. The conductor Will Crutchfield believes it is the combination of stamina and the work's orchestration that defeat most singers:

> The central difficulty for Tristan, the glue that binds the other difficulties and eventually defeats the singer with them, is stamina. . . Instead of a basic paradigm of vocal melody with accompaniment, or a string-based texture with support and coloration from winds and brass, Wagner often confides the main material to the winds and brass, and fills the string parts with vigorously swirling and churning ornamental overlay.[24]

The combination of length and dominating orchestral accompaniment creates almost unreasonable demands for any singer.

The vocal range of Tristan is no different than that of Lohengrin. He sings from c-sharp to a′. Though the role requires more singing in the lower register than either

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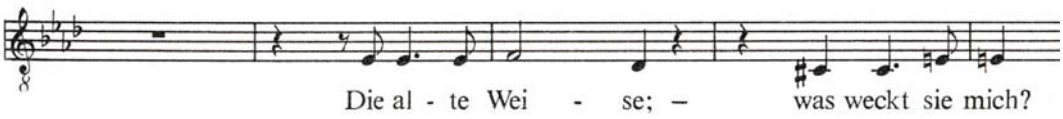
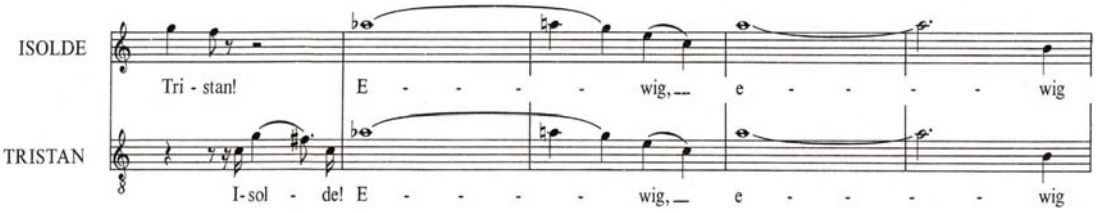
[23] Tristan's music was timed at a length of fifty-eight minutes and twenty-two seconds in Wilhelm Furtwängler, dir., *Tristan und Isolde*, by Richard Wagner, Philharmonia Orchestra, EMI 7 473228. The total length of this recording is four hours, eighteen minutes, and twenty-six seconds. Otello's music was timed at twenty-nine minutes and two seconds in Herbert von Karajan, dir., *Otello*, by Giuseppe Verdi, Wiener Philharmonic, Decca 411 618-2. The total length of this recording is two hours, eighteen minutes, and ten seconds.

[24] Will Crutchfield, "The Tristan Test," *Opera News*, December 1999: 16.

Tannhäuser or Lohengrin (in Act I, before he drinks the potion; in Act II, scene iii, when he sings his monologue, "O König, das kann ich dir nicht sagen;" and in Act III, when he first stirs), the tessitura becomes quite high during times of mounting tension. (Example 15 shows that low tessitura in Act III while Example 16 shows the mounting tessitura in the long love duet of Act II, scene ii.)



Example 15: Act III, scene i of *Tristan und Isolde*, mm. 158-162.



Example 16: Act II, scene ii of *Tristan und Isolde*, mm. 626-630.

Though Tristan presents unprecedented demands to any Heldentenor who must sing this critical role, the vocal lines are usually rather tuneful. It is true that Tristan must sing chromatic lines and tritone intervals, and it is also true that the tonal underpinnings of the work are constantly shifting, yet the vocal line is hardly a disjointed collection of random intervals, as some critics make the work out to be. Eduard Hanslick thought that *Tristan und Isolde* was "unvocal" and "unsingable" and he believed that the main roles "sin not only in their excessive demands upon the voice; because of the unnatural

intonation, the dominance of the chromatic and the enharmonic, the restless, inconclusive modulations, they are ultimately difficult to impress upon the memory."[25] Certainly, performing the role of Tristan is not easy: the singer who performs Tristan must not only have a large, durable voice, but he must also be an excellent musician with a superb memory. A singer with all of those attributes is not easily found, but the music of *Tristan* can be sung with a sound technique, with legato, and with attention paid to dynamics and phrasing. Singing the entire role, without barking out notes, is a very difficult task.

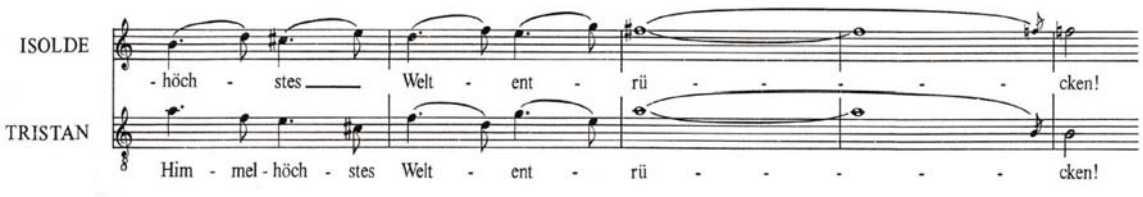
The most difficult moments of the role occur in the fifth scene of Act I, after Tristan and Isolde have consumed the potion, in the long love duet of Act II, and in Tristan's delirious monologue in Act III. After drinking the potion, Tristan and Isolde enter into a relatively short, yet tremendously ecstatic duet that might more accurately be called a volley of phrases. At this moment, the orchestra occasionally produces a torrent of sound achieved by having the winds and brass playing at *forte* and *fortissimo*. This level of sound is not constantly produced by the orchestra, but it is produced more consistently in *Tristan und Isolde* than in any other of Wagner's previous works, and probably than in all of his other works. (In fact, Wagner himself later thought the orchestration too heavy, particularly in the second act, and he considered revising the orchestration.[26]

Tristan does much of his singing in Act II. He actually sings for a longer period of time in Act II than in Act III, though he shares the singing burden of the second act

[25] Hanslick, *Hanslick's Musical Criticisms*: 224.
[26] See the December 11 and December 18, 1881 entries in *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 2: 767, 773.

with Isolde. When Tristan meets Isolde in the second scene of this act, every instrument in the orchestra, with the exception of the trumpets and the harp, accompanies his cry of "Isolde" at *fortissimo* (the winds, horns, and strings) or *forte* (the trombones, tuba, and timpani). Eventually the trumpets join in when the couple sings "O Wonne" just a moment later.

Though after *Lohengrin*, Wagner tended to not have his characters sing simultaneously, in *Tristan und Isolde*, the two main characters often sing together. Sometimes they exchange phrases in rapid succession, sometimes they sing in unison (see Example 16 above), and sometimes they a type of intricate counterpoint (Example 17). Thus, to be heard, the tenor singing Tristan must compete not only against the orchestra, but also against his soprano colleague.



Example 17: Act II, scene ii of *Tristan und Isolde*, mm. 604-608.

The level of Tristan and Isolde's singing does not remain at *forte* throughout the second act. In the middle of their love duet, the dynamic level comes down to *pianissimo* at "O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe," before the couple approaches a musical climax. This process of building intensity, relaxing, and then building again also occurs in Act III. Though Wagner placed tremendous demands on his singers, he did not write music

that was completely relentless. Tristan also has an opportunity to rest when King Mark makes his appearance in Act II and sings his long monologue. Tristan's response, "O König," has a lower tessitura, which also gives the tenor some respite.

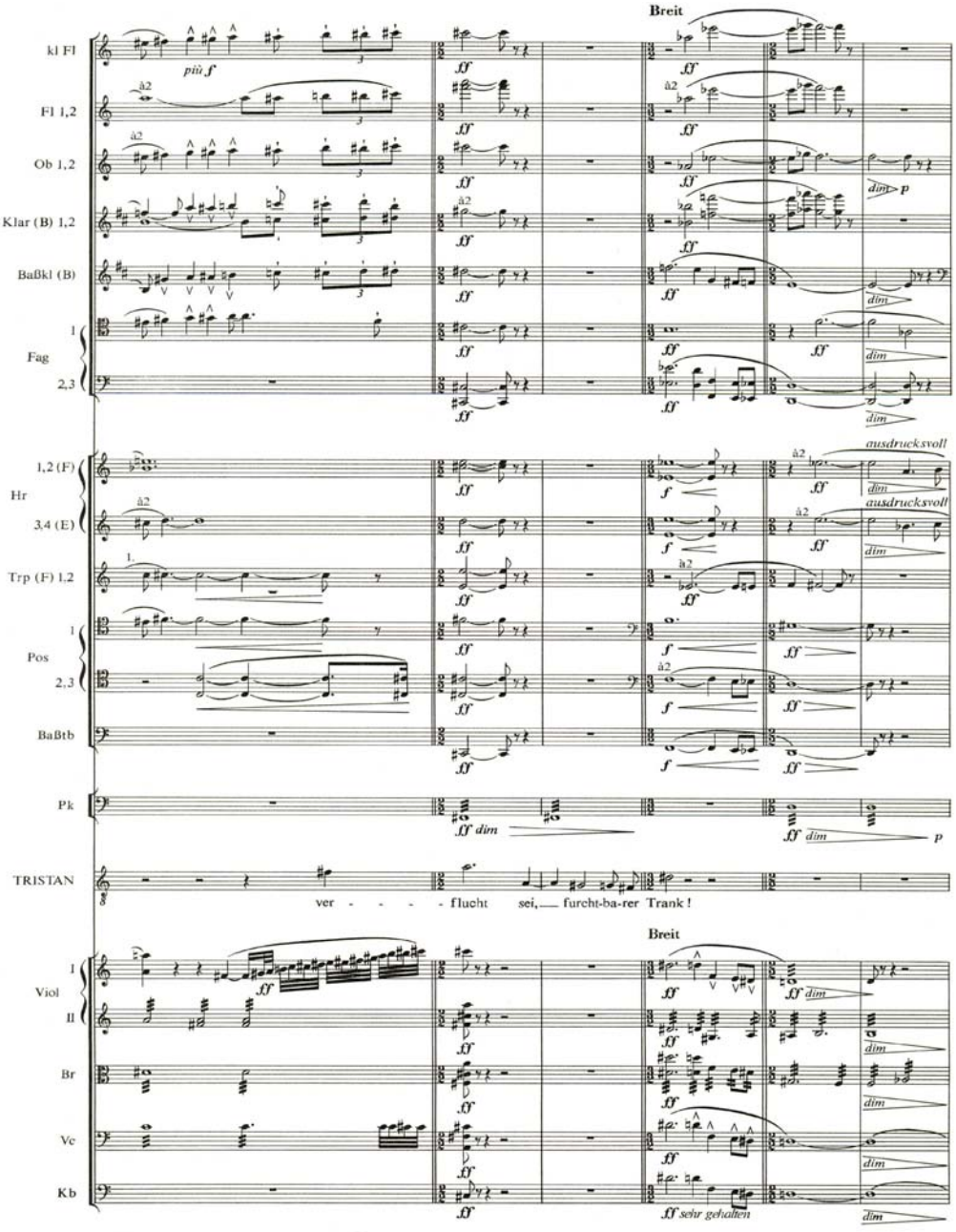
Act III remains one of the greatest tests of stamina for a Heldentenor. The amount of singing required of Tristan in this act is greater than many other opera roles, and in this act Tristan sings alone (though Kurwenal sings solo passages as well, which gives Tristan at least a little time to rest). As stated earlier, the tessitura begins low, only to rise as the dramatic tension increases. Accordingly, the orchestra becomes fuller and is scored more heavily; when Tristan curses the potion, every instrument but the harp plays *fortissimo* (Example 18). Only Siegfried compares in terms of length and difficulty, though, as will be seen later, Siegfried is not required to sing the long, sustained musical lines that Tristan has.

Walther

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg is the only comedy found in Wagner's mature works. Perhaps because of its popular appeal, it does not have a typical Heldentenor role. Though the role of Walther is by no means easy, it does not require the same type of hefty voice that Tristan or Siegfried does. Walther is far more lyrical than those roles and is often sung by more lyrical Heldentenors. (Lauritz Melchior never sang the role because he believed that the tessitura was too high for him.[27]) Yet the role is longer than the *Götterdämmerung* Siegfried and is a significant task for any tenor. Walther is considered a Heldentenor role primarily because of the length of the role and its

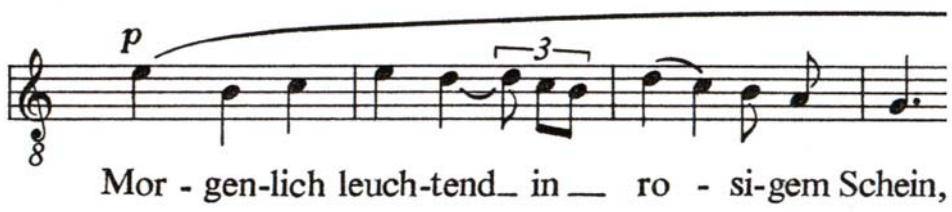
[27] Fitzgerald, "Speaking of Wagner," *Opera News*: 8.

prominence in the drama. However, the type of singing asked of Walther has more in common with traditional lyric roles than roles such as Siegmund or Siegfried.

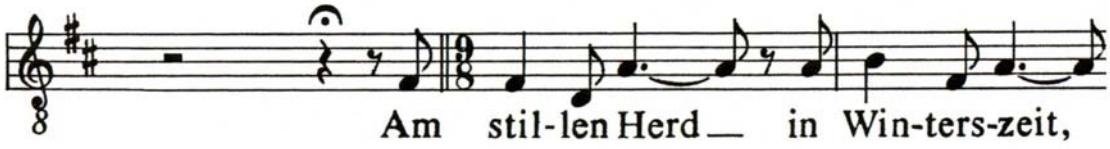


Example 18: Act III, scene i of *Tristan und Isolde*, mm. 832-837.

Walther, the impetuous knight who wins the mastersingers' song contest, sings for over thirty minutes, longer than even Parsifal and about as long as Siegmund.[28] Much of his singing is done in Act I, in which he sings "Am stillen Herd" and "Fanget an," and in Act III, when he sings one version or another of the Preislied four times. This role is not as musically challenging as Tristan, and the phrase length and the contour of the vocal lines are quite regular. Usually Walther's vocal lines move by step (such as in the Preislied, "Morgenlicht leuchtend," Example 19) or they outline triads (as in "Am stillen Herd," Example 20). As in *Lohegrin*, Walther's music must be sung legato. Though he does not sing often against the full orchestra, and therefore does need to worry about projecting his voice, the tenor singing Walther could become fatigued by the long-breathed phrases of this role.



Example 19: Act III, scene ii of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, mm. 656-659.



Example 20: Act I, scene iii of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, mm. 1483-1485.

[28] Walther sings for thirty-one minutes and fifty-seven seconds in Wolfgang Sawallisch, dir., *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, by Richard Wagner, Bayerisches Staatsorchester, EMI Classics 5 55142 2. The total length of this recording is four hours, sixteen minutes, and forty-two seconds.

Walther's vocal range could also prove challenging to some Heldentenors. He must sing from d to high c″. However, this c″ is a brief, quarter-note cry that comes in the fifth scene of Act II and it could easily be shouted more than sung. He also sings b-flat′ three times, though each time is brief and in the context of large ensembles. (Unlike Tristan and Siegfried, Walther sings in some large ensembles.) Walther does sing a′ thirty times and some parts of the role, such as "Fanget an" and the Preislied (the final version in particular), sit quite high. Ultimately, as Melchior noted, "In *Meistersinger*, there are no real mountains and valleys, so a heldentenor gets tired."[29]

Loge

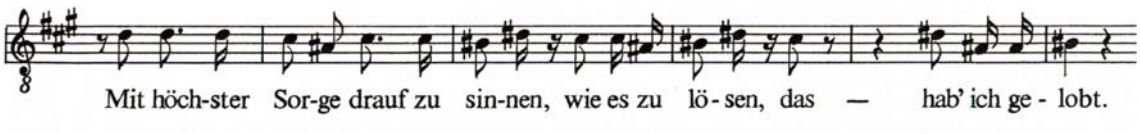
Das Rheingold is the shortest of the four works that comprise *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. As the first work of the cycle, it is called a *Vorabend*, or preliminary evening, a type of prelude to the other three works. Perhaps because of the relative brevity of the work, it lacks a true Heldentenor role. A Heldentenor is a heroic tenor, and though Loge is the god of fire and though he helps wrest the ring from Alberich, he is not a leading heroic tenor in the line of Tristan, Siegmund, and Siegfried. Though Heldentenors have sung the role (Heinrich Vogl, the original Loge, became a successful Siegfried and sang nearly all of the Heldentenor roles; Set Svanholm, famous for Tristan and Siegfried, sings Loge on Sir Georg Solti's recording of the *Ring* for Decca), usually Loge is sung by a character tenor with a lighter voice.

This role, though longer than Erik, is far shorter than the Heldentenor roles, with less than twenty minutes of music.[30] The range of the role is rather limited, from c-sharp

[29] Fitzgerald, "Speaking of Wagner," *Opera News*: 8

[30] Seventeen minutes and thirty-eight seconds in Daniel Barenboim, dir., *Das Rheingold*, by Richard Wagner, Orchester der Bayreuther Festspiele, Teldec 4509-91185-2. The total length of this recording is two hours, twenty-nine minutes, and seven seconds.

to g′, and Loge has few broad, sustained melodies. Most of Loge's music is highly rhythmic and he often sings short phrases that are interrupted by small rests (Example 21). It seems that Wagner was more concerned with capturing the natural rhythms of speech than giving Loge a powerful, heroic vocal line. Perhaps this is true because Loge appears only in *Das Rheingold* and in no other part of the *Ring*, and also because the drama does not focus on his character, but rather on Wotan and Alberich.



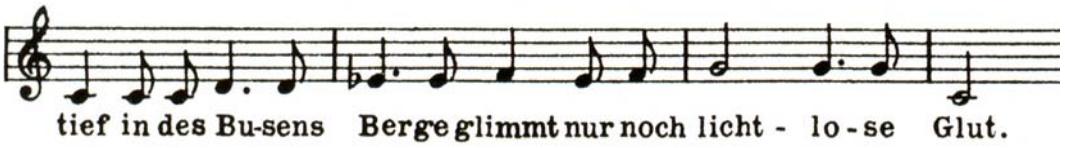
Example 21: Scene ii of *Das Rheingold*, mm. 1277-1282.

Though the orchestra for *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is larger than in his previous works, Wagner does not use his full forces to accompany Loge. The orchestra for the *Ring* includes a massive string section: sixteen first violins and sixteen second violins, twelve violas, twelve cellos, and eight double basses. The wind section is similar to previous ones, though here the sections consist of four players instead of three: three flutes and one piccolo, three oboes, one English horn (who must also play as a fourth oboe), three clarinets, one bass clarinet, and three bassoons. The brass section is notably increased: eight horns (two of which can play the tenor Wagner tuba, and two of which can play the bass Wagner tuba), one tuba, three trumpets, one bass trumpet, three "tenor-bass trombones," and one contrabass trombone. All of this is mentioned here because these same forces will be employed in the later *Ring* works.

Siegmund

The first day (*Erster Tag*) of the *Ring*, *Die Walküre*, includes the first mature Heldentenor role that Wagner composed. (Wagner composed *Die Walküre* before *Tristan und Isolde*, though the latter opera received its premiere five years before *Die Walküre* was premiered in Munich in 1870.) Siegmund has the lowest tessitura and essentially the lowest vocal range of all the Heldentenor roles. With approximately thirty minutes of music,[31] it is far from the longest of these roles, but the lower vocal range presents a challenge to some singers.

Siegmund sings from c to a′, yet the role's vocal range does not tell the whole story. Siegmund sings c eight times, c-sharp thirteen times, and d twenty-seven times, yet he sings above g′ only once, when he sings a climactic a′ at the end of Act I. Example 22, taken from the end of Siegmund's Act I, scene iii monologue, "Ein Schwert verhiess mir der Vater," reveals this low tessitura.



Example 22: Act I, scene iii of *Die Walküre*, mm. 919-922.

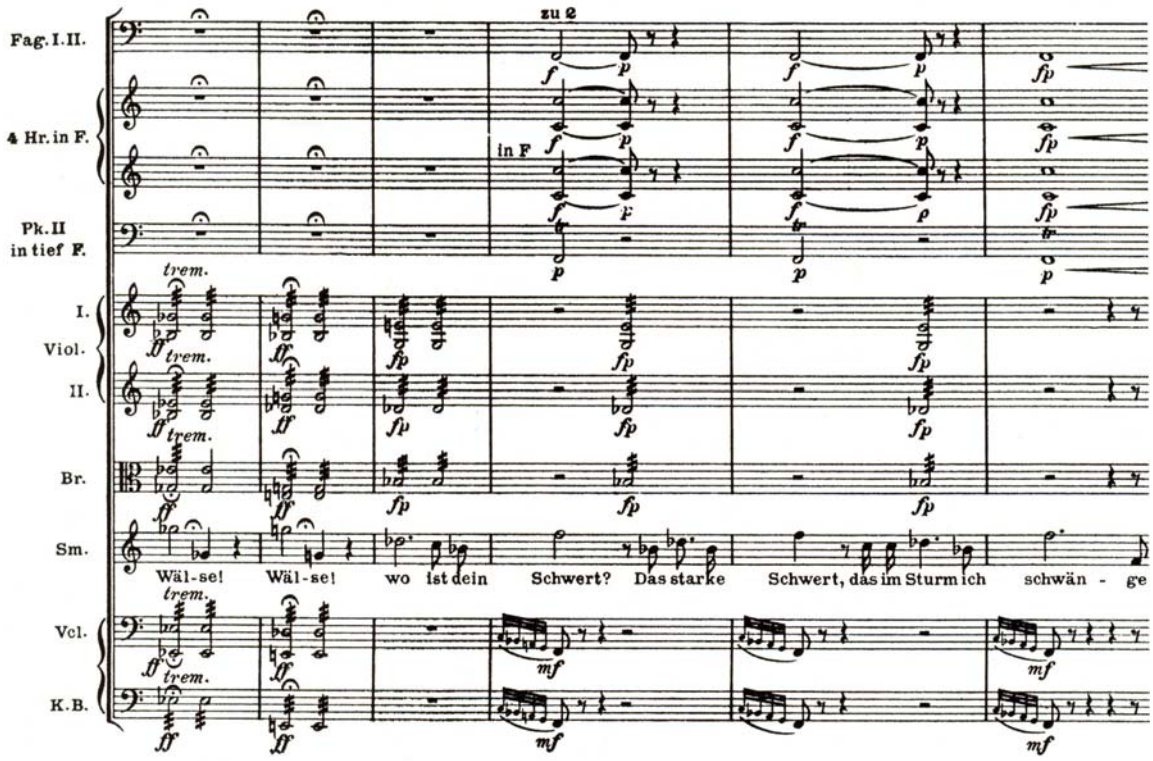
Siegmund is the role most suitable for baritonal Heldentenors. At least one baritone has been tempted by the role, though after further study, he declined to sing it. Even Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who sang roles such as Gunther and Hans Sachs during

[31] Twenty-nine minutes and twenty-three seconds in Erich Leinsdorf, dir., *Die Walküre*, by Richard Wagner, London Symphony Orchestra, Decca 289 470 443-2. The total length of this recording is three hours, thirty-six minutes, and sixteen seconds.

his career, considered recording the role of Siegmund for Solti's recording of the *Ring*. He decided not to take on this role, even though he would have had the luxury of recording it over several days, probably because there are moments when the tessitura rises beyond the comfort range of a baritone.[32] Siegmund has to sing f′, f-sharp′ (or g-flat′) and g′ several times. One example of this is found in his famous cries of "Wälse!" in Act I, scene iii (Example 23). This octave leap downward, the first half of the sword leitmotif, occurs frequently in Siegmund's music, just as they occur in Siegfried's vocal line frequently.

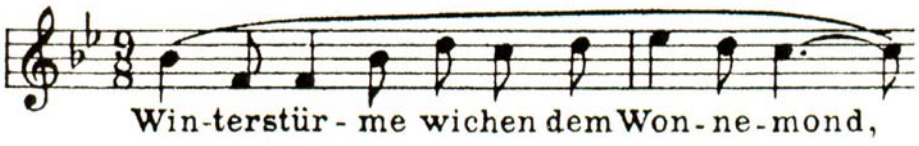
These cries of "Wälse!" also reveal two other aspects of Siegmund's singing. The Heldentenor who attempts to portray this hero must have reserves of vocal strength to sing such music. Yet, though this tenor must have stamina and a strong low voice, he will not likely be overpowered by the orchestra: Siegmund never has to sing above the orchestral fury found in *Tristan und Isolde*. Even at this dramatic moment, Siegmund is accompanied at first only by strings, and then by four horns and two bassoons as well. The only vocal projection that a Heldentenor might have to worry about would be found in the lower registers, though Siegmund's lower singing often is sensitively scored.

[32] John Culshaw, *Ring Resounding* (New York: Viking Press, 1967): 218.



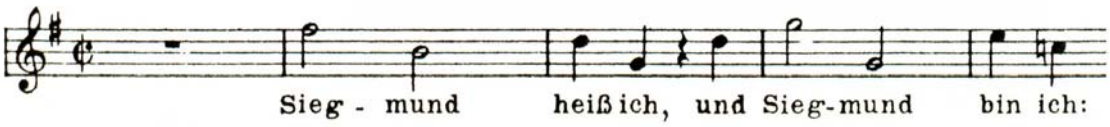
Example *23*: Act I, scene iii of *Die Walküre*, mm. 840-845.

Another unique challenge that Siegmund presents to Heldentenors is the combination of such dramatic singing and more lyrical singing, such as in the aria-like "Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond," also in Act I, scene iii. This passage requires long-breathed phrases and legato singing (Example 24). Siegmund must also sing tenderly in parts of "Ein Schwert verhiess mir der Vater" and in Act II when he sings to or about Sieglinde.



Example 24: Act I, scene iii of *Die Walküre*, mm. 1107-1108.

Siegmund is difficult for Heldentenors for one other reason: the pacing of the role in Act I. The problem of singing a great deal of music in one act is not unique to Siegmund, for Lohengrin does the same in Act III and Tristan must sing even more in both Act II and Act III. Unlike both of those roles, however, Siegmund always sings alone. He does not sing simultaneously with Sieglinde, who is on stage with him for much of Act I. In the second scene of this act he has a monologue, "Friedmund darf ich nicht heissen," and in the third scene he has three monologues, the aforementioned "Ein Schwert" and "Winterstürme," and also "Siegmund heiss ich und Siegmund bin ich" (Example 25). Again, perhaps the greatest challenge for Heldentenors is one of stamina.



Example 25: Act I, scene iii of *Die Walküre*, mm. 1379-1383.

Siegfried (*Siegfried*)

Though performing the role of Tristan is an indisputably arduous task, many consider Siegfried (in the opera of the same name, not in *Götterdämmerung*) the most difficult Heldentenor role. Shirlee Emmons calls it "the most difficult test of a Heldentenor"[33] and Jens Malte Fischer states that Siegfried "is precisely the role that today creates the most difficulty for casting offices."[34] According to Stephen Francis

[33] Emmons, *Tristanissimo*: 58.
[34] Fischer, "*Sprechgesang* or Bel Canto," *Wagner Handbook*: 545.

Vasta, "The role's length and tessitura make formidable demands on a tenor's stamina, and at any given time few are up to meeting its challenges."[35]

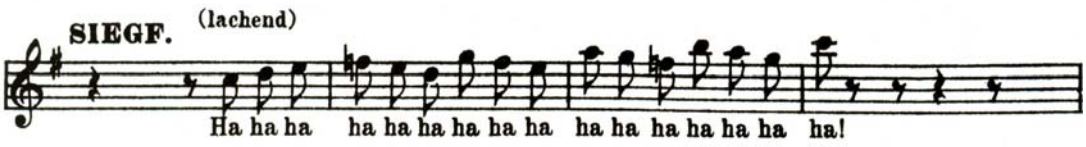
The most challenging aspect of this role is probably length. Siegfried is comparable to Tristan in terms of actual duration, yet Tristan is actually slightly longer.[36] While Tristan often sings sustained notes, Siegfried sings short notes, and since Wagner's vocal lines are largely syllabic, Siegfried has more words than Tristan to sing. Melchior, when considering the difficulties of the role, noted the sheer amount of text, claiming that Siegfried was the longest Heldentenor role because it has more than 7,000 words.[37]

In terms of pacing, Wagner gives the tenor singing Siegfried some time for rest: he does not sing in the second scene of Act I, nor does he sing in the first scenes of Act II and Act III. In the scenes in which Siegfried sings, much of the singing burden is shared by Mime, the Wanderer, Fafner, the *Vogelstimme*, and Brünnhilde. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Siegfried must sing for less than one hour, not several hours, as some critics report.[38]

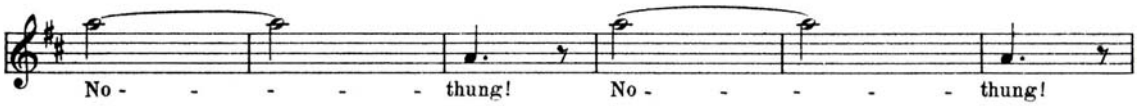
The vocal range of the role is wide, from c to high c″. However, that c″ only comes once, and very briefly, when Siegfried makes his vocal entrance (Example 26). Aside from that c″, there is one b′ in the same phrase and one b-flat′ in the second scene

[35] Stephen Francis Vasta, "What's the Matter with Siegfried?," *Opera News*, vol. 64, no. 10 (April 2000): 47.
[36] The timing of the role is fifty-one minutes and thirty-nine seconds on Sir Georg Solti, dir., *Siegfried*, by Richard Wagner, Wiener Philharmonic, Decca 455 564. The total length of this recording is three hours, fifty-seven minutes, and five seconds.
[37] Gerald Fitzgerald, "Speaking of Wagner," *Opera News*: 9.
[38] Critic Patterson Greene, reporting on a performance by Melchior in the *Brooklyn Eagle* on August 12, 1927, writes of Siegfried: "The role is a cruel one. It exacts about three hours of constant singing. It calls for pealing high notes, fiery declamation, light patter, and lyrical fervor." Quoted in Emmons, *Tristanissimo*: 80.

of Act III. Also, the c only appears once and Siegfried must sing a c-sharp or d-flat only six times. This role does require the singer to produce a′ many times, nearly all of which must be produced at loud dynamic levels. This a′ must be sung fifty times in all, thirteen more than in the role of Tristan, and twenty-one more than in both Lohengrin and Tannhäuser. (Example 27 shows Siegfried singing a sustained a′ twice in Act I, scene iii.)



Example 26: Act I, scene i of *Siegfried*, mm. 262-265.



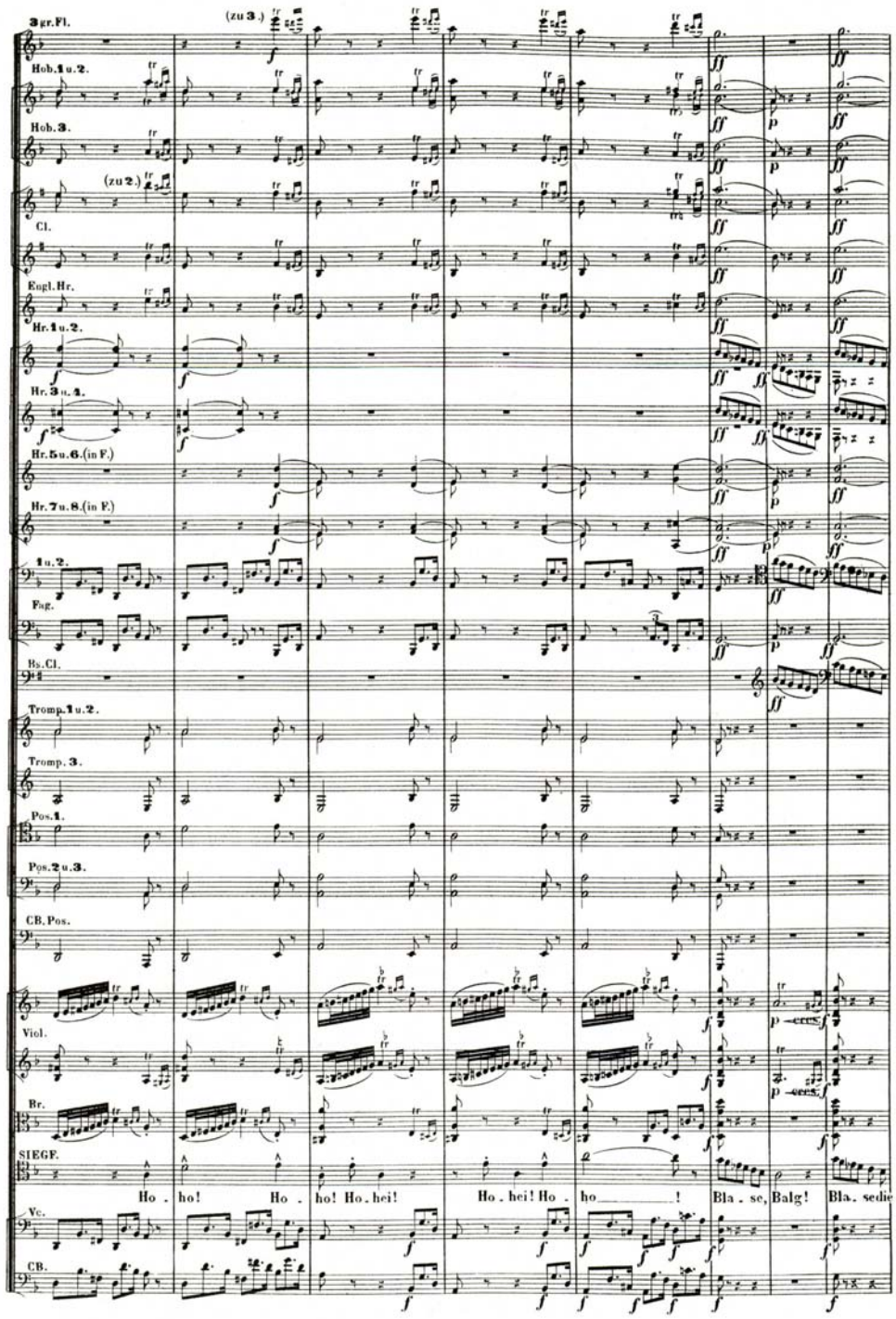
Example 27: Act I, scene iii of *Siegfried*, mm. 2900-2905.

While the tessitura of the role is at times quite high, at other times it rests firmly in the middle and lower-middle registers. (There are very few passages that a baritone could sing.) Another one of the challenging parts of this role is its eclecticism. The Heldentenor who performs Siegfried must be able to sing in a conversational, declamatory manner, and have power for his more heroic outbursts, such as during the forging song in Act I. Then, in the final scene of Act III, he must sing in a relatively lyric

fashion. These different types of vocalism are all part of Wagner's characterization of Siegfried, who is not only young and powerful, but also maturing and increasing in knowledge over the course of the work.

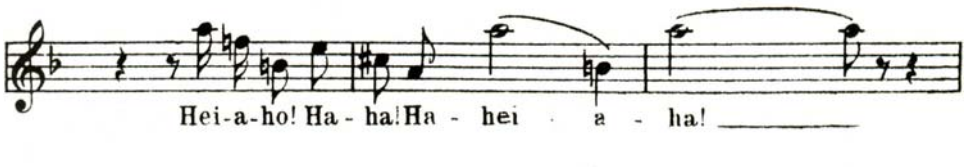
Though the orchestra employed in *Siegfried* is large, as it is for the entire *Ring*, very rarely does it threaten to drown out the singer. As in his other operas, Wagner uses the orchestra shrewdly, allowing its full forces to play only when the singer is at rest. There are only two exceptions: Siegfried's forging song in Act I and in parts of Act III, scene iii, when Siegfried encounters Brünnhilde. The forging song is one of the most difficult parts of the role, requiring a′ several times and singing against some heavy orchestration, particularly in the strings and the brass (as can be seen in Example 28).

One aspect of Siegfried's eclectic vocalism is the vocal line's tendency to feature wide intervals. Siegfried must often sing octave jumps, particularly downward octave leaps. (As in *Die Walküre*, this gesture is part of the sword motif and can be seen in Example 27.) Siegfried also sings intervals such as minor sevenths (as shown in Example 29), fifths, and fourths, and at other times his vocal line outlines triads. Rarely does he sing lyrical lines that move by step. These frequent leaps create a rather disjointed vocal line, presenting another challenge for a Heldentenor singing this role.

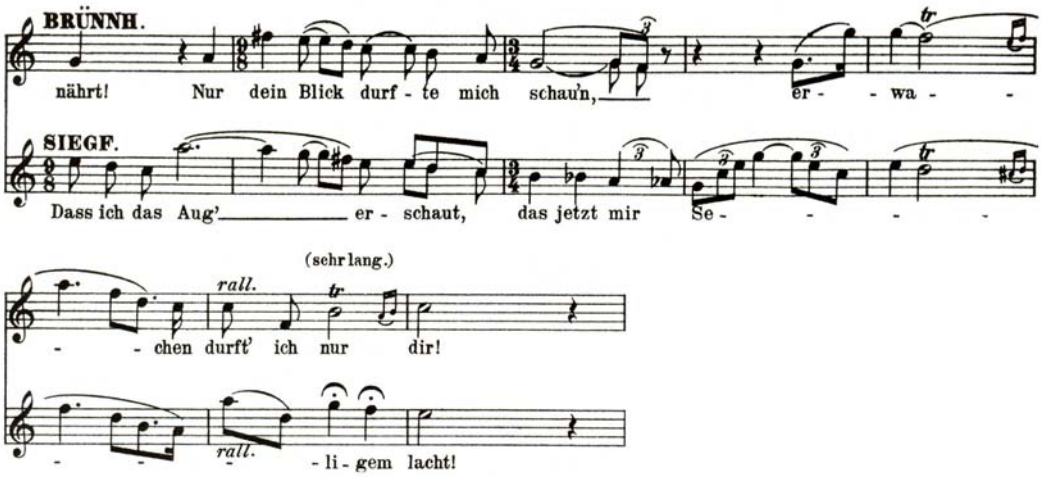


Example 28: Act I, scene iii of *Siegfried*, mm. 2449-2456.

Another demanding aspect of this role is its conclusion. After more than two acts and forty minutes of singing, Siegfried must do some of his most sustained singing with a fresh-voiced Brünnhilde. According to Shirlee Emmons, the "duet with Brünnhilde . . . looms as an almost impossible undertaking."[39] The tessitura for much of this duet is high, another difficulty for a Heldentenor. (Example 30 illustrates the long, high vocal line of Siegfried during this duet.) It is during this passage that the role of Siegfried rivals Tristan in strenuousness.



Example 29: Act I, scene iii of *Siegfried*, mm. 2713-2715.



Example 30: Act III, scene iii of *Siegfried*, mm. 1117-1124.

[39] Emmons, *Tristanissimo*: 58.

Siegfried (*Götterdämmerung*)

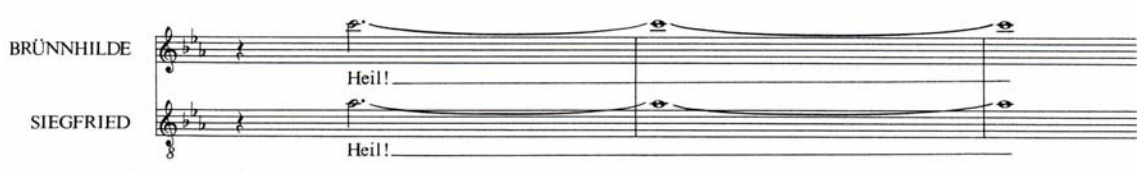
The *Götterdämmerung* Siegfried, though by no means an easy sing, is not nearly as long as title role in *Siegfried*. The elder Siegfried (the name often given to this role, to differentiate it from the younger Siegfried) must sing for less than thirty minutes.[40] While the role is comparable in length to Otello, it is far shorter than the young Siegfried, Tristan, and Lohengrin. Much of Siegfried's singing comes in Act III, particularly in scene ii, in which he dies. This scene presents the greatest challenge to the Heldentenor performing this role.

The vocal range of this Siegfried is the same as the young Siegfried: from B-sharp to c″. Siegfried sings this c″ twice, each time quite briefly. (The first c″ is a sixteenth note – as can be seen in Example 31 – and the second one is an eighth note.) He also sings one b-flat′, which is a sixteenth note. Otherwise, he does not sing above a′. It would be fair to say that the elder Siegfried's tessitura is lower than the young Siegfried's. Whereas the young Siegfried sings a′ fifty times, the elder Siegfried sings this note only twenty-one times. The elder Siegfried sings a-flat′ or g-sharp′ only seventeen times.

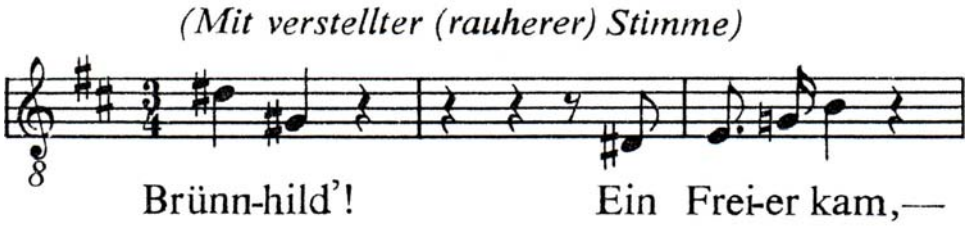
Example 31: Act II, scene iv of *Götterdämmerung*, mm. 1281-1283.

[40] Twenty-eight minutes and forty-four seconds in Sir Georg Solti, dir., *Götterdämmerung*, by Richard Wagner, Wiener Philharmoniker, Decca 455 569. The total length of this recording is four hours, twenty-five minutes, and seven seconds.

The vocal writing for the elder Siegfried, much like the young Siegfried, is rather eclectic. He must possess flexibility for some moments (like in Example 31) and at other times he must sing sustained high notes (Example 32, which comes at the end of the Prelude). There are moments when the tessitura rises, as in the long narrative he sings in Act III, scene ii; and other moments he must sing at a lower tessitura, such as when he is disguised as Gunther in Act I, scene three (Example 33). The Heldentenor who sings the elder Siegfried must possess a voice capable of performing all of these moments.



Example 32: Prelude to *Götterdämmerung*, mm. 632-634.



Example 33: Act I, scene iii of *Götterdämmerung*, mm. 1626-1629.

Since the two Siegfried roles are different in terms of their respective levels of difficulty, sometimes a Heldentenor is willing to sing the elder Siegfried, but not the young Siegfried. Albert Niemann and Ramon Vinay, for example, sang the elder

Siegfried but not the young Siegfried. These tenors are most likely scared off by the combination of stamina and high tessitura singing that the young Siegfried demands.

Parsifal

The Heldentenor role in Wagner's last work, perhaps contrary to conventional wisdom, is one of the easiest to sing. Though the music of *Parsifal* lasts for over four hours, the title character must sing for less than twenty-five minutes.[41] The role is not exceptional in terms of vocal range, tessitura, or other technical demands. Plácido Domingo, a veteran Parsifal, acknowledges as much: "Vocally, it is not very difficult. You don't have *that* much singing to do."[42]

Though the role does not require difficult singing in the way that Tristan or Siegfried does, it does present a different challenge to a Heldentenor: *Parsifal* is a difficult opera musically. The tonalities in this work are constantly shifting, sometimes in ways that are not easy to predict. Though all of Wagner's later works require singers who are good musicians, *Parsifal* presents the greatest musical challenges. According to Domingo, "Although it is not difficult vocally, Parsifal is difficult *musically*."[43]

The vocal range of this role is the same as that of Tristan and Lohengrin: from low d-flat to a′. The tessitura lies in mostly in the middle register. Parisfal sings a′ only twice and a-flat′ or g-sharp′ only ten times. Though there are a number of low notes

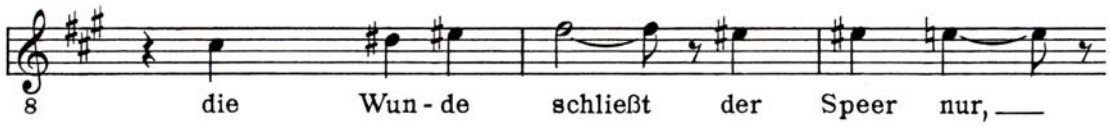
[41] Twenty-three minutes and thirty-nine seconds in Herbert von Karajan, dir., *Parsifal*, by Richard Wagner, Berliner Philharmonic, Deutsche Grammophon 2 GH4 413347. The total length of this recording is four hours, sixteen minutes, and fifty-six seconds.
[42] Domingo and Matheopoulos, *My Operatic Roles*: 215. (Original emphasis.)
[43] Ibid.: 216. (Original emphasis.)

(sixteen d's and two d-flats), Parsifal can hardly be sung by a baritone, because much of the music lies in the *passaggio*.

This role can be divided into two halves: before Kundry's kiss in Act II and afterwards. The greatest challenges occur after this kiss. Prior to it, Parsifal sings short, broken phrases, and he does not sing very high (Example 34). Afterwards, he sings more sustained phrases, particularly in the middle-high register, around e-flat′, e′, and f′. Therefore, the greatest vocal challenges that Parsifal presents come in the second half of the role, particularly in the Act II monologue, "Amfortas! Die Wunde!"

Example 34: Act I of *Parsifal*, mm. 890-895.

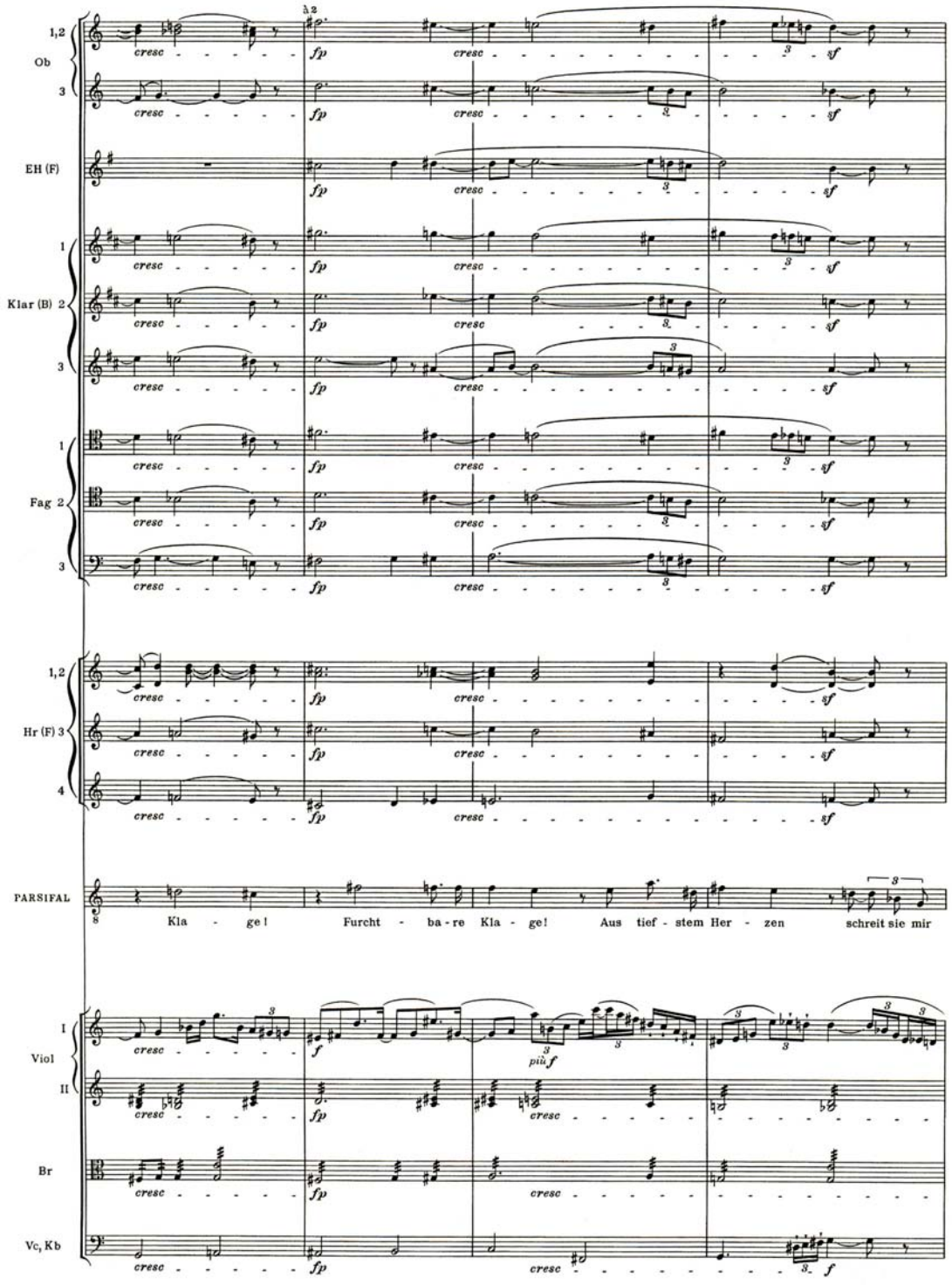
One of the prominent vocal gestures found in the role of Parsifal is a descending chromatic movement. Frequently, this occurs in the *passaggio*, which makes it difficult to sing. This chromatic movement can be seen in a portion of Act III shown in Example 35, and also in "Amortas! Die Wunde!" in Act II (Example 36).



Example 35: Act III of *Parsifal*, mm. 1032-1034.

Though the Heldentenor singing Parsifal must often sing in his *passaggio*, he usually does not have to sing over a large orchestra. The orchestra employed in *Parsifal* is very close to the one used for the *Ring*, except that in the later work there are only eight horns. Usually when Parsifal sings, he is not accompanied by the full orchestra. One notable exception is in "Amfortas! Die Wunde!" This monologue is the most difficult part of the work, in terms of vocal demands, for Parsifal. Example 36 illustrates the type of orchestration used at this moment: only the trumpets, trombones, tuba, and timpani are not playing at this key moment of the work.

Though Parsifal is not the most difficult work for a Heldentenor to sing, the role does reflect elements of the later Heldentenor roles: Parsifal's vocal line is very syllabic and it has been written to serve the natural speech accents of the text; he does not often sing in ensembles (even in his scene with the Flower Maidens in Act II, he rarely sings at exactly the same time as the other singers); and the role requires both speech-like declamatory singing and sustained singing as well. All of these elements are particularly true of Tristan, Siegmund, and both Siegfrieds.



Example 36: Act II of *Parsifal*, mm. 1006-1009.

Chapter Four: Wagner's Heldentenors

Those people who assume that the Heldentenor voice is extinct, or at least in decline, would probably also assume that at one point the Heldentenor voice had thrived. For example, it seems logical that the Heldentenor was alive and well during Wagner's lifetime, when the composer was able to supervise performances of his works and coach singers. After all, if Wagner had written such difficult and unique music for his tenors, he surely had many extremely talented and uniquely gifted tenors at his disposal.

The truth of the matter, however, is quite a different story. Wagner found that there were very few singers who were capable of performing his Heldentenor roles in a thoroughly competent manner. Few singers could sing the entirety of these roles without losing their voices or resorting to bellowing, and of those few, even fewer understood Wagner's dramatic aims. Wagner had difficulty casting his Heldentenor roles throughout his life, for these roles were so different from the more conventional operatic roles found in Italian bel canto or French Grand Opera, both of which were very popular in Germany during the first half of the nineteenth century. Wagner therefore had to coach and groom his singers – in some cases he had to reinvent them – in order to prepare them for the challenges of their roles.

The three singers with whom Wagner worked most closely were Joseph Tichatschek, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, and Albert Niemann. Tichatschek was the first Rienzi and the first Tannhäuser, and he also had success in the role of Lohengrin. Schnorr was the first Tristan, as well as a successful Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, and he

was also Wagner's favorite Heldentenor. Niemann sang Siegmund in the first complete performances of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (in Bayreuth), he was the Tannhäuser in the infamous performances of that opera in Paris in 1861, in addition to singing the majority of Wagnerian tenor roles. In the case of each tenor, we have Wagner's comments on their strengths and weaknesses, and an examination of these in light of Wagner's relationship with each tenor indicates how he wanted his tenor roles to be performed.

Joseph Tichatschek, Wagner's first Heldentenor, was a gifted singer who was blessed with a wonderful memory. Though he had an exceptional voice, he was a poor actor and did not understand Wagner's new type of music drama. Ludwig Schnorr had the intellectual ability and artistic vision that Wagner desired for his tenors, yet he worked with Schnorr only twice and the tenor died at the age of twenty-nine. Albert Niemann was, by all accounts, a riveting actor, yet Wagner found him to be stubborn and selfish, and his lack of both humility and cooperation disappointed Wagner.

Joseph Tichatschek

When Wagner came to Dresden in 1842, he did so because *Rienzi* was accepted for a new production there, something that did not happen in Paris. Wagner knew that in Dresden he could count on the services of two singers who would prove to be important to his career: Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient and Joseph Tichatschek. In addition to becoming the first tenor to perform Rienzi and Tannhäuser, Tichatschek served as the vocal prototype for the Heldentenor. His voice, which was widely regarded as superior, was most likely the one that Wagner had in mind when he wrote his later Heldentenor

roles. Wagner worked with Tichatschek closely for over six years in Dresden, and, with the exception of *Der fliegende Holländer*, all of Wagner's mature operas were written after Wagner had become thoroughly acquainted with this tenor's voice.

Tichatschek was born in what is now Teplice in Bohemia on July 11, 1807. In 1827, he came to Vienna to study medicine. While there, he took voice lessons with Giuseppe Ciccimarra (1790 – 1836), an Italian tenor who sang in Naples and performed in premieres of six Rossini operas, including *Otello* and *Mosè in Egitto*. In 1830, Tichatschek began his singing career, joining the chorus of the Kärntnertortheater. Five years later, Tichatschek made his debut as a soloist in Graz, and in 1837, he returned to Vienna, only to make his debut that same year in Dresden, in the title role of Auber's *Gustavus III*. The following year he was appointed to the Dresden Hofoper, where he performed for more than thirty years.

While the exact nature of Tichatschek's vocal training is uncertain, one can assume that he received an Italianate bel canto technique from his teacher, given Ciccimarra's background. During Tichatschek's first few years in Dresden, he sang primarily French operas. In his first five seasons at the Hofoper, he performed works such as Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, Adolphe Adam's *Le fidèle berger* and *Le brasseur de Preston*, Auber's *Le serment*, and Halévy's *Guido et Ginevra*.[1] These operas could not have prepared a tenor for Wagner. The only roles that Tichatschek performed in those years that might have prepared him for Tannhäuser and Lohengrin were in the

[1] The roles that Tichatschek sang in new productions at the Dresden Hofoper are found in Michael Hochmuth's *Chronik der Dresdner Oper* (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 1998).

operas of Carl Maria von Weber: Adolar in *Euryanthe* and Max in *Der Freischütz*, which he sang in 1842, the year of the premiere of *Rienzi*.

Wagner was excited by the opportunity to perform his epic opera at Dresden, and the availability of Tichatschek played no small role in that excitement. In *Mein Leben*, Wagner states, "I had decided upon Dresden in the knowledge that I should find there in Tichatschek the best tenor for the leading role."[2] A letter written to Theodor Apel on September 20, 1840 reveals that Wagner had considered Dresden, because of Tichatschek, even at that early date.[3] Word of Tichatschek's excellent singing had spread across Europe; even Henry Chorley, who was usually dismayed by the level of singing in Germany, gave the tenor praise:

> Among the tenors of Germany, Herr Tichatschek still bears a high reputation; and few, in any country, have ever crossed the stage with an ampler proportion of natural advantages. He is of the right height – handsome – his voice in 1839 was strong, sweet, and extensive, taking the *altissimo* notes of its register in chest tones. Then, too, he possessed a youthful energy of manner calculated to gain the favour of all who hear and see him. I have heard no one in Germany who was better qualified to sustain the glorious music belonging to the part of Adolar.[4]

Tichatschek apparently rated with the best tenors to be found in anywhere in Europe at that time, and not only did his voice appeal to Chorley, but also his appearance. In addition to those advantages, Chorley reports that Tichatschek had an extensive range and could take the highest notes in chest voice, just like the famous Duprez. Hector

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[2] Wagner, *My Life*: 188.
[3] *Richard Wagner Briefe*, ed. Hanjo Kesting (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1983): 90-5.
[4] Chorley, *Modern German Music*, 1: 299.

Berlioz, who heard Tichatschek sing Rienzi and also the "Sanctus" of his own *Requiem*, wrote in similarly glowing terms: "Tichatschek… has a pure and charming voice which in the theatre, under the stimulus of dramatic action, takes on uncommon warmth and energy. His style is simple and tasteful; he is a most accomplished musician and reader."[5] Berlioz was struck by the beauty and warmth of Tichatschek's voice, as well as his musicianship.

These attributes served Tichatschek well when performing Rienzi, for the tenor's vocal feats were largely responsible for the opera's success. Wagner acknowledged as much in his autobiography: "When I thus pondered what had really caused the success of my *Rienzi*, I concluded that it was the result of the glorious, electrifying voice of the tirelessly exuberant singer."[6] The composer's comment reveals another aspect of Tichatschek's singing: its indefatigability. The tenor had the ability to sing long roles, apparently without much problem. According to Wagner, the first performance of *Rienzi* lasted six hours, including intermissions, and Tichatschek's performance grew "in gusto and verve the longer it lasted."[7]

The first opera that Wagner composed after working with Tichatschek was *Tannhäuser.* Surely the tenor's rare vocal abilities must have influenced Wagner in some way when he wrote the vocal line of the demanding title role. Wagner knew when composing the opera that it would be performed in Dresden and that he would have

[5] Hector Berlioz, *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, trans. and ed. David Cairns (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969: 301.
[6] Wagner, *My Life*: 243.
[7] Ibid.: 232.

Tichatschek at his disposal. At the very least, Tichatschek's abilities must have encouraged Wagner to write difficult tenor roles, for he knew that at least one singer was equal to the challenge. In an article on Wagnerian singing, Jens Malte Fischer claims that Tichatschek influenced all of Wagner's Heldentenor writing:

> Above all throughout his life Wagner retained a mental image of vocal beauty based on the recollection of the voice of his first Rienzi and Tannhäuser, Josef Tichatschek. Italian bel canto carried over into the Wagnerian parts as legato, the natural gift of a 'lovely tremulous smile' in the voice, a tireless, virile, and radiant vocal organ: all that had indelibly imprinted on Wagner, according to his own testimony, the ideal of how a dramatic tenor must sound.[8]

Wagner's praise for the tenor focused on his brilliant, powerful voice, his musicianship, and his vocal technique. Wagner called him a "real genius of vocal rhythm" who "asserted that if the first note were hit correctly the rest would follow as a matter of course."[9] Tichatschek's performance of Tannhäuser's Rome narrative from Act III "was delivered with his customary rhetorical amplitude of tone and with such force that it was a joy to hear the accompanying trombones completely dominated by the singer."[10] Tichatschek was not the perfect Heldentenor, however, for his one deficiency was a glaring one, particularly for Wagner: the tenor was a poor actor and he failed to grasp the composer's dramatic aims.

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[8] Jens Malte Fischer, "*Sprechgesang* or Bel Canto: Toward a History of Singing Wagner," *Wagner Handbook*: 529. Tichatshek's first name is often spelled Josef in German and Joseph in English.
[9] Wagner, *My Life*: 284.
[10] Ibid.: 311.

For every time Wagner praised Tichatschek's voice, he also criticized the singer's poor dramatic skills. Even in *Rienzi*, not the most dramatically challenging of roles, Tichastschek failed to understand his character: "His horrendous errors and faults in the performance of the part had never escaped me; Tichatschek had not for a moment been willing to lay aside his glittering manner as a heroic tenor to do justice to the gloomy, demonic strain in Rienzi's character."[11] In the fourth act, at the moment when Rienzi's excommunication is proclaimed, Tichatschek would fall on his knees in order to show his character's despair. This gesture must have seemed very effective to the tenor, the type of movement that is typical of a desperate opera character. Wagner, on the other hand, wanted his hero to remain resolute. Nevertheless, Tichatschek believed his dramatic interpretation to be the more popular one, so he continued to perform the scene with his own dramatic conception.[12]

Tichatschek's poor acting skills had become more apparent in *Tannhäuser*, where the drama is much more demanding. He failed to grasp the central character's torment and anguish at having to decide between his sensual life with Venus and the pure love of Elisabeth. Tichatschek's largest blunder came in Act II, when he addressed his song of sensual love to Elisabeth. The tenor must have thought, as tenors of the early nineteenth century often did, that he had to address his singing to the first lady, which would have been the soprano singing the role of Elisabeth (who, incidentally, happened to be

[11] Ibid.: 243.
[12] Skelton, *Wagner at Bayreuth*: 36.

Wagner's niece, Johanna). For Wagner, Tichatschek's acting troubles outweighed his superior vocal performance:

> He was well aware of his great talent for using his metallic voice to sing with rhythmic and melodic beauty and precision, while not sacrificing any of his superb clarity of enunciation. That all this was not enough was something I had to learn myself and to my own amazement; and when even during the first performance of *Tannhäuser* I discovered to my horror something that had unbelievably managed to escape my attention in the rehearsals, namely that Tannhäuser at the end of the contest of song coyly directed his ecstatic and oblivious hymn to Venus right at Elisabeth, toward whom he strode as he delivered it.[13]

Seven years after the premiere of *Tannhäuser*, Wagner wrote an essay in 1852 titled "On the performing of *Tannhäuser*" in which he tried to set some guidelines for how this work is to be performed.[14] Wagner must have written this in an effort to stave off the type of dramatic performance he received from Tichatschek. Wagner's first suggestion is that the cast of the opera should become familiar with the text of the opera before embarking on the music. The opera should be rehearsed first as a spoken play. Only when the proper expression of the text is learned can the music be rehearsed. Too often singers focus solely on the musical aspects of an opera, only to leave the drama to the last few rehearsals, but in his works, Wagner wants performers to approach their tasks in a quite different fashion.

Though Wagner would have to wait for Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, the first Tristan, to work with a true singer-actor, Tichatschek's influence on Wagner's vocal

[13] Wagner, *My Life*: 306.
[14] Wagner, *Judaism in Music*: 167-206.

writing is undeniable. Wagner himself admitted as much. In 1856, Wagner admitted that he wrote *Lohengrin* with Tichatschek in mind. This admission came in a letter he wrote to his friend Wilhelm Fischer, who was the chorus master in Dresden:

> That T. has at last sung the *Lohengrin* gave me great joy! I certainly was not mistaken when, in writing that part, I foresaw that it would be one of his best! Only, what a pity that I could not give a performance of the opera with him, and, instead, must leave it to bunglers to create the part. I willingly believe, that even now Tichatschek is the best in it, and again, willingly would I be present when he sings it.[15]

Two years later, on October 9, 1858, Wagner wrote another letter to Fischer in which he calls Tichatschek a "living wonder."[16]

Wagner surely could have used the tenor's voice in his later works, which were finally performed when Tichatschek was retiring. In a letter to Tichatschek, written on July 20, 1871, Wagner lamented the fact that he completed *Siegfried* after the tenor's retirement: "When you study Siegfried, consider how disgraceful it is that I finished it too late for you. I always heard your voice alone in my imagination, and now who can take your place?"[17] It may be true that Wagner was only flattering a singer who had been so instrumental to securing performances of his early works, for Tichatschek was tremendously devoted to Wagner and championed his works.

The tenor's voice must have made an incredible impact on Wagner, for not only did his voice serve as a model for the roles of Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, it also

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[15] The letter is dated April 29, 1856 and is found in *Richard Wagner's Letters to his Dresden Friends*, trans. J. S. Shedlock (New York: Vienna House, 1972): 409.
[16] Ibid.: 428.
[17] Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold, *We Need a Hero! Heldentenors from Wagner's Time to the Present* (West New York, NJ: Weiala Press, 1989): 51.

influenced Wagner's later works. Wagner would later admit the effect of Tichatschek's voice on his works: "The special tenor sound of Tichatschek remained to me for all time definitive and may well have contributed to the fact that I – what I later often regretted – wrote the leading parts in my works for this voice type."[18] Wagner regretted modeling his Heldentenor parts after Tichatschek's voice because in his lifetime no other tenor had such an exceptional voice and could therefore execute these roles to Wagner's satisfaction.

Tichatschek's influence on Wagner's vocal writing is interesting because so many elements of his career are contrary to the Heldentenor myth. There is a certain irony in the fact that the Heldentenor was modeled on a singer who studied with a Rossini tenor, who surely was taught a bel canto technique, and whose repertory included many French and Italian opera roles. In addition to performing the French operas mentioned above, Tichatschek's repertory included roles in *Don Sébastien* and *La Favorite* by Donizetti; *Armide* and *Iphigénie en Aulide* by Gluck; *Le Prophète* and *L'étoile du nord* by Meyerbeer; Mozart's *Idomeneo*; *Fernand Cortez* and *La Vestale* by Spontini; and Verdi's *Ernani*. The tenor roles in those operas are generally not associated with Heldentenor singing, yet Tichatschek's voice must have been suited for that type of repertory.

That repertory is of particular interest for anyone trying to understand the nature of Tichatschek's voice. His career, of course, preceded the advent of recordings, as did

[18] "Der besondere Tenorklang Tichatscheks blieb mir für alle Zeiten maßgebend und mag wohl dazu beigetragen haben, daß ich – was ich später öfters bereute – die führenden Partien in meinen Werken für diese Stimmgattung geschrieben habe." Julius Hey, *Richard Wagner als Vortragsmeister* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1911): 136 (my translation).

the careers of both Schnorr and Niemann. So when trying to imagine these tenors' vocal timbres, one must consider their repertory and the accounts of their contemporaries. As seen above, Tichatschek's voice was often described as brilliant, ringing, powerful, and penetrating. Those who heard his voice never mentioned that it was dark or heavy, or that his voice resembled a baritone's. His repertory also suggests that his voice must have been able to handle a high tessitura as well as the many high notes found in French Grand Opera and Italian bel canto. A "baritone/tenor" would never be able to manage that repertory.

One other aspect of Tichatschek's career deserves mention: his longevity. He continued to perform in Dresden until 1870, the year he turned sixty-three. Not only did he sing for a long time, but he sang well, retaining the quality of his voice. In May 1856 Tichatschek visited Wagner in Zurich and sang some excerpts of *Lohengrin* for the composer. Wagner was astonished at the youthful quality of his voice. In 1867, when Ludwig II wanted a model performance of *Lohengrin* performed in Munich, Wagner could think of no tenor better suited for the role than Tichatschek, who sang in the dress rehearsal of the production. Wagner was pleased with his tenor, yet Ludwig was repulsed by Tichatschek's appearance, however, which had not aged as well as his voice. The King called him "the Knight of the Rueful Countenance" and requested that he be replaced.[19] Wagner replaced Tichatschek with Heinrich Vogl, who would be Loge and Siegmund in the first Munich performances of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, respectively, and would eventually sing every Heldentenor role except Walther.

[19] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4: 77.

Though Tichatschek was not the Lohengrin of those performances, he was able to add Walther to his repertory in 1868, when he sang performances of *Die Meistersinger* at Hannover, Leipzig, and Prague.[20] Such longevity shows that one can sing Wagner and thrive, yet it proves more than that. In order to sing opera for over thirty years, and to sing such varied repertory, Tichatschek had to have an exceptional technique, which he acquired from an Italian tenor: the model Heldentenor had a bel canto technique. Wagner praised Tichatschek's vocal ability, so he must have had no qualms with Tichatschek's Italianate training, so long as the result of that training was applied to his own works.

Though Tichatschek's voice was undeniably excellent, Wagner was never satisfied with vocal beauty alone. For Wagner, quality of voice was one of three aspects of a singer-actor; vocal expression, which concerns phrasing and the proper stress of words, and physical acting were the other two. Wagner would soon collaborate with a tenor who would understand the importance of that second aspect.

Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld

After completing the composition of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1859, Wagner had to wait six years for its premiere. Much of the reason for that delay had to do with Wagner's search for a tenor who was capable of singing and acting this challenging role. Before finding his first Tristan, Wagner had considered a few tenors who might be up to the task. In late 1859, Wagner told Albert Niemann that he planned on producing his

[20] Ibid.: 134.

works in Paris the following year. Niemann would sing Tannhäuser, Tichatschek would sing Lohengrin, and both would sing Tristan.

Of course, this plan never came to fruition, nor did Wagner's attempt at securing a *Tristan* premiere in Vienna, where Aloys Ander was the star singer. Wagner attempted to coach Ander in the role, yet the tenor kept losing his voice and his confidence. (He would soon lose his sanity, as well, and would die at the age of forty-seven.[21]) Ernest Newman writes that "with each fresh attack of hoarseness or of general malaise he became more and more convinced that *Tristan* would kill him."[22] Ander's struggle to learn and sing the role gave rise to the myth that *Tristan* was impossible to perform. Wagner tried to accommodate the tenor by cutting material from Act III and altering the vocal line of the role, yet it soon became clear that Ander would not be the man for the job. Wagner himself would write of the tenor: "Such a sung-out invalid like this Ander, having become completely and totally incompetent, my Tristan?? Impossible!"[23]

The right singer for that job was Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, whom Wagner first saw in performance as Lohengrin, in Karlsruhe on May 26, 1862. Prior to this encounter, Wagner had heard of the tenor's talent for a few years. Wagner had also heard of the tenor's obesity, a condition which caused the composer some anxiety, for the physical appearance of his singers was important to him. Wagner was hesitant to even

[21] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 3: 147.
[22] Ibid., 3: 147.
[23] "So ein abgesunger, ganz und gar unfähig gewordener Invalid, wie dieser Ander, mein Tristan?? Unmöglich!" From a letter to Mathilde Maier dated January 4, 1863 in *Richard Wagner Briefe*: 464 (my translation).

meet the tenor because of the reports of his weight. Yet Schnorr's first appearance dispelled any fears that Wagner might have concerning his appearance:

> His earliest entry placed me under the quite specific spell of the God-sent legendary hero in whose regard one asks not: How he is, but tells oneself: Thus is he! And indeed this instantaneous effect, piercing the very soul, can be compared with nothing but magic; I remember to have experienced it in my earliest youth with the Schröder-Devrient, determining the cast of my whole life, and since then never so definitely and strongly as with Ludwig Schnorr at this entry in 'Lohengrin.'[24]

Wagner would never fail to speak of Schnorr in glowing terms such as those above. For Wagner, Schnorr was the consummate artist, and the only tenor who fully understood his artistic goals. Together they worked on a production of *Tannhäuser* as well as the first production of *Tristan und Isolde*. The young tenor could have been the first Siegfried and the first Walther, and he also could have been the voice teacher for the music school of which Wagner had always dreamed. Schnorr, however, died at the age of twenty-nine shortly after the first performances of *Tristan*. Wagner would continue to mourn this loss for several years, probably because he was denied having such a talented singer at his disposal for his later works.

Schnorr was born on July 2, 1836 in Munich, the son of the painter Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. Schnorr studied at the Leipzig Conservatory, and while he was still a student, he was engaged to sing at the Karlsruhe Hofoper by Eduard Devrient, the director of the theater and the brother-in-law of Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient. Schnorr started singing comprimario roles in Karlsruhe in 1854, beginning with a small role in

[24] Wagner, "Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld," *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, 4: 228.

Les Huguenots, in which his future wife, Malvina Garrigues, sang Valentine. After singing small roles in operas such as *Norma*, *Die Zauberflöte*, and *Le Prophète* (for which Tichatschek, appearing as a guest artist, sang the central role), Schnorr started singing leading roles such as Max in *Der Freischütz*. In 1857 he sang Tannhäuser for the first time; the following year he added *Lohengrin* to his rapidly growing repertory.[25]

That repertory would become very large and diverse within only a few years. He sang Mozart (Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*, Tamino in *Die Zauberflöte*, Tito in *La Clemenza di Tito*), Beethoven (Florestan in *Fidelio*), Donizetti (Edgardo in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Gennaro in *Lucrezia Borgia*), Rossini (Arnold in *Guillaume Tell*), Meyerbeer (Raoul in *Les Huguenots*, Jean de Leyden in *Le Prophète*), Gounod (Faust), and, of course, Wagner (Erik, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, and Tristan). Schnorr seems to have been entirely devoted to his art and extremely diligent. In 1860 he joined the Dresden Hofoper, where Tichatschek was singing. In his first season there, he sang thirteen roles and in one six-day stretch he sang five performances.

With such a varied repertory, it is hard to ascertain exactly what type of voice Schnorr had. Eduard Devrient, in an 1856 letter to Schnorr's mother, describes the young singer's voice and talent: "His voice extends to the heights and sounds very beautiful; it is rich and promising. He has natural talent, fire, and an inherited, artistic [sense of] rhythm."[26] Robert Prölss, historian of the Dresden Hoftheater, recalls Schnorr's voice:

[25] Much of the information presented here on Schnorr's career is indebted to Verdino-Süllwold's *We Need a Hero!*

[26] "Seine Stimme dehnt sich in der Höhe aus und klingt sehr schön, sie ist reichhaltig und vielversprechend. Er hat natürliches Talent, Feuer und angeerbten künstlerischen Takt." Carl Henri Nicolai Garrigues, *Ein*

"A wonderfully elegiac, somewhat veiled tone, which, however, emerged triumphant like the sun, dividing fleeting clouds, a beautiful portamento, [and] a magnificent cantilena, combined with a refined manner and an expressive acting, suited him chiefly for the heroes of modern Italian [opera], as well as for the romantic character of Wagnerian opera."[27]

The above descriptions focus primarily on the beauty of his voice and its range; they only hint at a darker than average timbre. One critic, reviewing a performance of *Lohegrin* in the June 7, 1860 edition of the Dresden *Signale*, describes Schnorr's voice as being one of "unusual power" (ungewöhnlicher Kraft) and "baritone-like" (baritonartig), while somehow also being "prevailingly bright" (vorwaltend hell).[28] It is doubtful that Schnorr's voice resembled a modern baritone's, or was baritone-like in the sense that Lauritz Melchior's voice was. To be able to sing Arnold and Faust with a baritonal timbre would be almost unimaginable, for each role has extreme high notes and a high tessitura. As for Don Ottavio, one could not imagine a singer like Melchior or even James King singing such a role. It is more likely that Schnorr's voice was darker than the average nineteenth-century tenor's voice, yet lighter than modern tastes demand.

No matter what type of vocal timbre Schnorr possessed, it was his expressive ability that commanded Wagner's attention at that 1862 performance of *Lohengrin*.

Ideales Sängerpaar: Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld und Malvnia Schnorr von Carolsfeld (Berlin: Hermann Wendt, 1937): 68 (my translation).

[27] "Ein wunderbar elegischer, etwas verschleierter Ton, der aber siegreich wie die Sonne, flüchtiges Gewölk zerteilend, daraus hervortrat, ein schönes Portamento, eine herrliche Cantilene, verbunden mit vornehmer Haltung und einem ausdrucksvollen Spiel, eigneten ihn vorzugsweise für die Helden der modernen italienischen, sowie für die romantischen Gestalten der Wagner'schen Opern." Ibid.: 120 (my translation).

[28] Ibid.: 120.

Wagner never mentioned the quality of Schnorr's voice, whether it was dark or bright; he was far more concerned with the tenor's ability to emote: "The warmth and tender inspiration, shed from the wondrous love-filled eyes of this scarcely more than youth, forthwith assured me of the daemonic fire with which they once would flame; to me he rapidly became a being for whom, on account of his boundless talent, I fell into a tragical suspense."[29]

Such "suspense" led Wagner to work with Schnorr. In the summer of 1862, while Wagner was in Biebrich, Ludwig and his wife Malvina, who would be the first Isolde, visited the composer over a period of two weeks, while they were on holiday. There, under Wagner's watch, the couple sang much of *Tristan und Isolde*, the score of which they had been studying for three years on their own. They also sang some of *Lohengrin* and what had already been composed of *Die Meistersinger*. During this period Wagner coached Schnorr in the role of Tristan.

Schorr had apparently expressed doubts as to his ability to perform the third act of *Tristan*. As for these doubts, Wagner later reported that "they had less arisen from any fear of over-taxing and exhausting the voice, than from his inability to understand one single passage."[30] Schnorr's doubts focused on Tristan's curse on Love, a passage which Wagner proceeded to explain to the tenor. When Wagner had showed Schnorr the proper expression and tempo of this passage, Schnorr's doubts were removed. Wagner's account of his instruction is interesting for it reveals his belief that if a singer understands

[29] Wagner, "Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld," *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, 4: 228-9.
[30] Ibid.: 229.

the proper expression of a phrase or even a longer passage, all questions of technique are erased:

> I admitted that with this slower tempo I was certainly making a quite unwonted, perhaps a monstrous demand on the singer's strength; but *that* he made utterly light of. . . To me that one feature has remained as unforgettable as instructive: the utmost physical exertion lost all its fatiguingness, owing to the singer's having grasped the right expression for the words; the spiritual understanding gave forthwith the strength to overcome the material difficulty.[31]

Schnorr, unlike Tichatschek, was able to comprehend the expression that Wagner desired, an attribute that earned Wagner's unceasing praise. At this point Wagner knew that Schnorr would be the best singer for the role of Tristan, though he would have to go through the ordeal with Ander in Vienna before being able to work with Schnorr.

The first collaboration between Wagner and Schnorr was a production of *Tannhäuser* given in Munich on March 5, 1865. The two had only one rehearsal together, but that one session made such an impact on Wagner that he wrote about it at length in his memorial to Schnorr, written three years later. In this essay, "Meine Erinnerungen an Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld," Wagner reports that Schnorr thoroughly absorbed his instructions with great sincerity. What impressed Wagner more was Schnorr's performance of the role, which he described in glowing terms:

> With this one, this never repeated impersonation of Tannhäuser, Schnorr had thoroughly realised my innermost artistic aim; the Daemonic in joy and sorrow had never for one moment been lost from sight. The crucial passage in the second finale, so often begged by me in vain: '*Zum Heil*

[31] Ibid.: 229-30.

> *den Sündigen zu führen*' etc. – obstinately omitted by every singer on plea of its great difficulty, by every Kapellmeister in virtue of the customary 'cut' – for the first and unique time was it delivered by Schnorr with that staggering and thereby harrowing expression which converts the hero, of a sudden, from an object of abhorrence into the typic claimant of our pity.[32]

In one performance of Tannhäuser, Schnorr achieved what Tichatschek could not. Wagner had given up hope that a singer could correctly interpret the passage mentioned above. Wagner had agreed to cut the passage because Tichatschek could not interpret it properly, a concession that he regretted. Schnorr had none of the problems that Tichatschek had, for he seemed to have had not only the vocal resources, but also the intellect, to understand the type of music drama that Wagner was trying to create. Both voice and intellect would be necessary for Tristan.

Though Schnorr had performed Erik, Tannhäuser, and Lohengrin, nothing in his repertory could have prepared him for Tristan. Wagner had already composed *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, two acts of *Siegfried*, and part of *Die Meistersinger*, yet none of these operas had received their debut before 1865, the year that *Tristan und Isolde* was first performed. It is hard to imagine how the role of Tristan might appear to a young tenor, no matter how talented, in 1865 – yet Schnorr apparently had no problems performing the role. He only earned praise from Wagner and he was the only tenor with whom Wagner was not, in some way, displeased.

The performances of *Tristan und Isolde* were in many ways Wagner's ideal: he had a fairly long rehearsal period of nearly two months, and he was able to work with the

[32] Ibid.: 232-3.

singers and oversee every aspect of the production. Wagner viewed the performances as being very successful. He was particularly pleased with Schnorr: "They may judge for themselves the magnitude of Schnorr's achievement, when I call on every candid hearer of those Munich performances to testify that, from the first bar to the last, all attention, all interest was centred in the actor, the singer, stayed riveted to him, and never for a moment, for one single text-word, did he lose his hold upon his audience."[33]

For Wagner, Schnorr must have seemed like a gift. After dealing with Tichatschek, a marvelous singer and an uncomprehending artist, and Ander, who was completely intimidated by *Tristan*, Wagner was ecstatic at having a dedicated actor-singer like Schnorr at his disposal. Wagner's excitement over Schnorr's performance of Tristan led him to write: "No words could express my estimate of the ideal now fulfilled by him."[34]

Unfortunately for Wagner, his collaboration with Schnorr was fated to be a short-lived one. The production of *Tristan und Isolde* received four performances in Munich, on June 10, 13, 19, and 30, 1865. On July 9, Schnorr sang Erik in a performance of *Der fliegende Holländer*, which was followed on July 12 by a concert of Wagnerian excerpts, which included music from *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Die Meistersinger*. After spending three months in Munich, Schnorr had to return to Dresden and his position at the Hofoper. On July 15, Schnorr participated in a rehearsal of *Don Giovanni*, in which he was to perform Don Ottavio the following night. He became ill

[33] Ibid.: 236.
[34] Ibid.: 235.

after that rehearsal, however, and canceled the performance. On July 21, after six days of intense illness, Schnorr died, apparently of typhoid fever.[35]

The proximity in time between the *Tristan* performances and Schnorr's death lent some credence to the idea that this role was murderous. Schnorr had complained about cold drafts of air coming from the wings during the third act of *Tristan*, which led some to believe that his exertions in this opera led to his demise. Ernest Newman writes that both Ludwig and Malvina Schnorr regarded Ludwig's death as a kind of sacrifice:

> There can be little doubt today that Schnorr himself attributed his fatal illness not simply to the draught from the wings at the last *Tristan* performance but to the physical and mental exhaustion to which his long preoccupation with the nerve-racking part had reduced him. Malvina regarded him as having, in a sense, sacrificed his life to the man for whose art they both had so profound a reverence.[36]

While the idea of Schnorr's death as a sacrifice to his art makes good drama, surely it is not reality. That line of thinking ignores Schnorr's history of fragile health and his obesity. In 1858, he suffered from what was described as an enlargement of the heart, a condition which forced him to undergo a period of rest. It was his poor health, combined with a busy schedule of performances, which led him to an early death.

It is also likely that Schnorr's early death increased the amount of praise which he posthumously received. Like others who die young, Schnorr was remembered for what he accomplished while alive as much as for what he could have achieved had he lived

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[35] Ernest Newman, in the third volume of *The Life of Richard Wagner*, writes that Schnorr had an "apoplexy of the brain" (p. 405). Newman later reports, in the forth volume, that forty-nine years later Schnorr's nephew, Dr. Franz Schnorr von Carolsfeld, claimed his uncle died of typhus (p. 20). Apparently the typhoid fever culminated in a stroke, upon which Schnorr died.

[36] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4: 19.

longer. Quite often the potential of those who die young is greatly exaggerated, probably because it is impossible to prove that those speculations are wrong. After all, one could say that Schnorr could have been the greatest Tristan and Siegfried ever, and that he would have taught at Wagner's proposed music school and would have created the uniquely German method of singing for which Wagner longed. It would be impossible to prove that those speculations are correct or are incorrect; they simply make for interesting conversation. Yet even Wagner speculated performing his works would have been easier had Schnorr lived: "If Schnorr had not died, our fate would probably have been a different one. . . Without him there was no longer any hope for our kind of art."[37] Wagner felt this way because so few of the singers with whom he worked were sympathetic to his art and it was often difficult, in the pre-Bayreuth years, to get his works produced. *Tristan und Isolde* would not be performed again until 1874, in Weimar.

For all of Wagner's praise of Schnorr's abilities, very few of his comments are specific enough to reveal exactly what Schnorr did that pleased him so much. The most definite of Wagner's comments regarding his favorite tenor still leaves later generations wondering what separated Schnorr from all of the other singers of his time: "That mellow, full and brilliant organ, when employed as the immediate implement for achieving a task already mastered mentally, produced on us the said impression of absolute indefatigableness."[38] It seems that it was Schnorr's "mental mastery" of his

[37] Wagner quoted on February 23, 1870 in Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 1: 192.
[38] Wagner, "Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld," *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, 4: 237.

Wagnerian roles and his complete devotion to art which impressed Wagner so much. In the above comment, Wagner states that Schnorr had a "full and brilliant" voice, yet the tenor did not use that instrument for his own glory; he used his voice towards an expressive end.

Schnorr appears to have been a most humble opera singer, one who, in Wagner's experience, was all too rare. Whereas Tichatschek often used his voice to make an effect in an effort to win over his audiences, Schnorr never drew such attention to himself through those means. Wagner writes, in his essay on Schnorr, that the tenor was completely receptive to his instructions. There is no account that suggests Schnorr let his pride or ego sabotage Wagner's objectives. Wagner would not always have such a modest yet talented tenor at his disposal.

Albert Niemann

Talent is often coupled with an equal measure of obstinacy. Wagner wanted to work with talented individuals, but he always enjoyed working most with those who were completely devoted to him and his works. His favorite collaborators were those whom he could bend and shape to his purposes. Tenors, however, are not usually known for being malleable. That would apply to Albert Niemann, who enjoyed a rather long association with Wagner's works. Niemann was the Tannhäuser in Paris in 1861, the Siegmund in Bayreuth in 1876, and the first Siegmund and Tristan in America, at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1880's.

Niemann was known for the intensity that he brought to the stage. His greatest contributions to Wagnerian performance seem to be physical ones: he was Wagner's physical ideal and he was often praised for his acting. While Tichatschek sang only Rienzi, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, and Walther (and almost exclusively in Dresden), and while Schnorr's career had been short, Niemann sang Wagner's works for over thirty years, his Wagnerian repertoire was large, and he performed these roles internationally. Niemann thus served as Wagner's ambassador of sorts and his performances probably helped shape the public perception of the Heldentenor.

Albert Niemann was born on January 15, 1831 in Erxleben, near Magdeburg. Like Schnorr, Niemann began his theatrical career at a young age, singing small roles at Dessau in 1849. Also like Schnorr, little is known of the nature of his early vocal education. He was never known for the beauty of his voice and it has been suggested that he had little interest in vocal technique, instead relying on natural talent and instinct. His reputation as an artist can be found in his obituary in *The New York Times*: "His greatness was never summed up in his command of vocal art, but in his unequaled power as a lyric actor, in his musical declamation, and in his superb representations of the great heroic figures in Wagner's music dramas and others. Indeed, he had in his later years, at any rate, a scorn for vocal method."[39]

After spending two years in Dessau, Niemann would make debuts in Stettin, Berlin, Worms, Darmstadt, and Halle, singing roles such as Servius in *Norma* in the

[39] "Albert Niemann, a Great Wagnerian Tenor – His Success in New York Recalled," *New York Times*, February 11, 1917: XX6.

larger theaters and leading roles such Max in *Der Freischütz* and Dickson in Boieldieu's *La dame blanche* in smaller theaters. Niemann was fortunate enough to have one of his performances in Stettin attended by the director of the Hannover Hofbühne, who was pleased with the tenor and quickly engaged his services. Niemann made his debut in Hannover as Max on March 26, 1854.[40] That year Niemann sang his first Wagnerian role, Tannhäuser. Niemann thought that the role was so well suited to him that he boldly declared, "Tannhäuser is as though written for me!"[41]

Niemann had success with the public in Hannover, particularly because he was not one of the typical "Schmelz- und Schmalz-Tenöre,"[42] but rather an actor who sought to portray roles according to their texts and not their pretty tunes. His singing, however, left something to be desired so he was encouraged to pursue vocal studies in 1855, when he traveled to Paris to study with Duprez, who, like Rubini, was the object of Wagner's derision in 1840. They worked together on the role of Jean in *Le Prophète*, which Niemann sang upon his return to Hannover in the autumn of 1855.

That year Niemann added Lohengrin, his second Wagnerian role, to his repertory, which rapidly expanded to include Raoul in *Les Huguenots*, Eléazar in *La Juive*, Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, and Spontini's *Fernand Cortez*. In 1859 he added Rienzi to this list. His repertory would encompass many French Grand Opera roles, including also Vasco da Gama from Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* and other French roles such as Faust. Niemann

[40] Much of the information regarding Niemann's early career can be credited to Richard Sternfeld, *Albert Niemann* (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1904).
[41] "Der Tannhäuser ist wie für mich geschreiben!" Ibid.: 18.
[42] This statement does not translate well into English, though its sense is "mellifluous and crooning tenors." Ibid.: 20.

would also eventually sing two Verdi roles: Manrico (*Il Trovatore*) and Radames (*Aida*). His German repertory would include Max and Florestan (*Fidelio*) in addition to Rienzi, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Tristan, Siegmund, the *Götterdämmerung* Siegfried, and Walther von Stolzing.

Unfortunately for Niemann, he is not always remembered for his diverse repertory or his dramatic strengths, but instead is remembered as being the tenor who sang Tannhäuser in the infamous Paris production of 1861. This story is a well known one and need not be recounted here in full,[43] though some of its details are necessary: Wagner had finally secured a production of one of his operas in Paris and was given essentially one season at the Opéra to prepare *Tannhäuser*. Wagner was given carte blanche for the casting of the opera and his first choice for the title role was Niemann. Rehearsals started on September 24, 1860 and after 164 rehearsals the first performance was held on March 12, 1861. The Jockey Club sabotaged the premiere and the subsequent performance by making loud catcalls and even bringing dog whistles. After three performances, the opera was withdrawn.

This production was the first collaboration between Wagner and Niemann, though Wagner had wanted to work with Niemann for a few years. Wagner had heard of Niemann's success in Hannover and had wanted to use him for a production on *Tannhäuser* in Vienna in 1857, though the tenor was not available. It was in that year that Wagner (before hearing Schnorr sing) imagined Niemann as his first Tristan. In the

[43] For a thorough account of the 1861 *Tannhäuser* production, see Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 3: 3-128.

summer of the following year, Niemann happened to be in Zurich, where Wagner was living, and visited the composer, though he did not sing for him, for Tichatschek was also visiting and the two tenors refused to sing in front of each other. Wagner would have to wait until Paris to have the opportunity to work with Niemann.

When Wagner first met Niemann, in 1858, he was struck by the tenor's physique: "By his almost superhuman stature he immediately struck me as if destined to be my Siegfried."[44] Wagner was always concerned about the physical aspects of his productions, including the appearance of his singers, and Niemann's appearance was ideal for the heroic Wagnerian tenor roles. Photographs of Niemann show that he would not be considered a very large man by modern standards, though he appears to have been physically fit and rather trim. Years later Wagner would cast an even larger tenor, Georg Unger, as Siegfried for the first Bayreuth festival in 1876. While that bit of casting turned out to be less than satisfactory, Niemann proved over time to be a successful Heldentenor.

While planning for the Paris *Tannhäuser*, Wagner was very enthusiastic about his tenor. "The main question in this regard was a tenor for the title role: for this I could think of no other but Niemann from Hannover, whose praises were sung to me on all sides."[45] Even at the beginning of the rehearsal process, Wagner was pleased with Niemann. This attitude soon changed, however, for Niemann began acting more like the star tenor and less like the willing artist that Wagner had wanted. Eventually Niemann's

[44] Wagner, *My Life*: 568.
[45] Ibid.: 616.

mood became sour, for he was certain that the production would be a failure. According to Wagner, he had tried to bribe the Parisian critics and was told by them that no matter what, the performances would be doomed, because of local politics.

Wagner's account of Niemann's change in demeanor reflects his growing disappointment with the tenor:

> From this time on he had become moody, while toward me he tried to assume a demonic air... Above all, Niemann, who at the outset had openly insisted on maintaining the integrity of the part, now began demanding certain cuts... When he again demanded the excision of the adagio passage in the second act finale which I knew to be of crucial importance, and which he had sung in several early rehearsals to the great emotion of all those present, he responded to my protest with a letter stating he had no desire to hazard his voice and reputation on my account; if I didn't want to cut the piece, he wrote, I should find whoever else I could to sing it. I knew from that point on I was dealing with a beast driven wild by cowardice.[46]

Wagner felt betrayed by Niemann. The tenor wanted to cut the very passage which Wagner had thought so instrumental to the drama of the opera, a passage which Schnorr would sing four years later, much to Wagner's delight. Unlike Schnorr, Niemann showed little humility and little dedication to Wagner's cause. When the members of the Jockey Club booed the opera, Niemann apparently shrugged his shoulders on stage and pointed to the box in which Wagner sat, as if to divest himself of any blame.[47]

In an eleventh-hour attempt to change Niemann's increasingly recalcitrant attitude, Wagner wrote the tenor a letter on February 21, only three weeks before the first

[46] Ibid.: 630-1.
[47] Ibid.: 635-6.

performance. In this letter Wagner pleaded with Niemann to make a renewed effort to cooperate, to take some of the composer's advice. Niemann apparently would not even take Wagner's advice in such matters as breathing and phrasing, failing to separate two phrases in the first stanza of Tannhäuser's song to Venus with a breath. Instead, Niemann joined the two phrases in an Italianate manner. Wagner's disappointment with Niemann, even at this stage is apparent: "Never, since your arrival in Paris, have I succeeded in obtaining the slightest trust from your side. You have held aloof from me in a fashion that has been well-nigh insulting, and have gone to almost excessive trouble to avoid taking any advice whatever from me."[48]

Though Wagner felt that Niemann had failed him, the Parisian critics were impressed with the tenor. In the *Revue et Gazette des Théâtres* Niemann was proclaimed as "a singer of talent; he has a fine and powerful tenor voice which would be more comfortable in our own great repertory,"[49] and the *Figaro* reported that Meyerbeer had reserved the tenor part in *L'Africaine* for Niemann.[50] Hans von Bülow, however, was not impressed by Niemann, probably because the tenor was not devoted to Wagner. In a March, 26 1861 letter to his friend Alois Schmitt, Bülow maligns Niemann's voice, suggesting he is not even a tenor: "The performance was most excellent: the one blot on it was Herr Niemann, whose toneless baritone. . . was a bitter disappointment to both the

[48] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 3: 87.
[49] Ibid.: 128.
[50] Though he was not the first Vasco da Gama (*L'Africaine* premiered in Paris in 1865 with a French tenor, Emilio Naudin), Niemann's first performance upon returning to Hannover was Raoul in *Les Huguenots*. Wagner would no doubt view Niemann's performances of Meyerbeer's operas as further betrayal.

Master and the public."[51] Wagner's disappointment with Niemann would cause him to avoid working with the tenor, whom he once envisioned as his Tristan and Siegfried, for more than a decade.

Wagner's disenchantment with Niemann could be attributed to what Wagner perceived to be a lack of fidelity on the tenor's part. Niemann was not faithful to the score of *Tannhäuser*, insisting on traditional cuts. Worse still, Niemann was not faithful to Wagner, for he tried to distance himself from the failure of the *Tannhäuser* production. It is also likely that Wagner was jealous of Niemann: while Wagner earned only 750 francs for the three performances in Paris, Niemann received 54,000 francs for his nine months of work.[52] Niemann also received some critical acclaim, while Wagner's opera was practically chased off the stage. This state of affairs surely did not seem just to Wagner.

Devotion was the attribute that Wagner seems to have valued most from his tenors. Tichatschek was very faithful to Wagner's music, refusing cuts in the lengthy *Rienzi*, and championing Wagner's later scores. Schnorr seems to have been completely responsive to Wagner's directions and he also had the intellectual capacity to understand that which Wagner was trying to accomplish. Niemann, on the other hand, seems to have been, at the age of twenty-nine, more unyielding in his ideas as to what was "effective" on the stage. He had, after all, already performed the role of Tannhäuser in Germany.

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[51] Hans von Bülow, *Briefe*, 7 vols. (Leipzig: 1899-1908), 3: 394, quoted in Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 3: 112-3.
[52] Newman, *The Life of Wagner*, 3: 120.

Wagner's working relationship with Niemann could easily have ended after the Paris *Tannhäuser* production, for Wagner was never known to suffer anyone who would disappoint him. Yet after Schnorr's death and Tichatschek's retirement, there were very few tenors in Germany who were capable of singing his works. The fact that Niemann would be Wagner's Bayreuth Siegmund is a testament to the tenor's talents and it is also evidence of the lack of adequate Heldentenors during Wagner's lifetime. Before Wagner was compelled to work with Niemann again, he used other tenors for the performances of his works that he supervised.

After the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* with Schnorr, Wagner had the opportunity to produce model performances of *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. (*Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* were also produced in Munich, though without Wagner's participation and against his wishes; he wanted *Der Ring des Nibelungen* performed as a whole.) King Ludwig II wanted Niemann to sing Lohengrin and Tannhäuser in Munich in 1867, yet Niemann refused to sing the operas without cuts. Instead, Heinrich Vogl, who would later be the first Loge and Siegmund (in Munich, not Bayreuth), would sing the *Lohengrin* performances while a local tenor named Hacker was the Tannhäuser.

Wagner was not pleased with Vogl, whom he would call "a thoroughly incompetent singer" in a letter to Ludwig on March 30, 1868.[53] He gave the first performances of Walther in *Die Meistersinger* to Franz Nachbaur, who would sing the first Froh. (Niemann would sing Walther in Berlin two years later.) *Das Rheingold* was

[53] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4: 132.

first performed in 1869 in Munich, where *Die Walküre* was presented one year later. Vogl sang the leading roles in those productions, neither of which was given under Wagner's supervision.

Niemann would enter into Wagner's life again in 1872, when the tenor participated in the laying of the foundation-stone at Bayreuth. This event was commemorated by a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, in which Niemann was the tenor soloist. One year later in Berlin, Niemann participated in a concert of excerpts from the *Ring*, singing Siegmund's "Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond" and Siegfried's forging song. In April of 1875 in a similar concert, Niemann sang Siegfried's farewell from *Götterdämmerung*. That summer the rehearsals for the *Ring* were held at Bayreuth and Niemann was the Siegmund.

Though Siegmund would be one of his greatest achievements, Niemann's participation in the first Bayreuth *Ring* was not without incident. His pride was still great and though he was satisfied with the role of Siegmund, he also wanted to sing Siegfried, at least in *Götterdämmerung*. In that summer of 1875, he would even return his *Walküre* score to Wagner; in September he expressed an interest in singing the four leading tenor roles of the *Ring*: Loge, Siegmund, and the two Siegfrieds. Yet when in 1876 Niemann finally accepted his original assignment as Siegmund, Wagner would remark: "You don't look a gift Siegmund in the mouth!"[54]

[54] This statement was recorded by Wagner's wife on February 19, 1876 in *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 1: 893.

Niemann was the most accomplished tenor in Germany, and perhaps the logical choice for Siegfried, yet Wagner looked elsewhere to cast this key role. Many thought that Wagner simply wanted a younger tenor than Niemann, who was forty-five in 1876, and that he also wanted two different tenors to sing Siegmund and Siegfried, so that the illusion of the drama would not be compromised. Yet Wagner's final choice for Siegfried, after much searching, was Georg Unger, who was only six years younger than Niemann. The two tenors therefore were similar in age and also physique (Unger was even larger than Niemann, as photographs show), yet perhaps Unger had one advantage in Wagner's eyes: he was not set in his ways, and was therefore more teachable and more of a blank slate than Niemann. So Unger received a year of coaching from Wagner's preferred voice teacher, Julius Hey, while Niemann continued performing in Berlin, adding Tristan to his repertory.

Niemann must have felt some vindication when, after the performances of the *Ring*, he received critical acclaim while Unger earned unenthusiastic notices. Edvard Grieg was present at Bayreuth and he reported both of Niemann's success and Unger's mediocrity:

> Niemann as Siegmund was overwhelmingly good, so successful in combining his vocal and acting abilities on the stage that he represents the very best I have seen. Even in passages where Wagner relies on the orchestra alone to express the inner sense of the drama Niemann acts with conviction and sensibility. . . Unger as Siegfried is not much to talk about, although he does not actually spoil anything. It is said Wagner chose him

> for his fine appearance rather than his talent and I dare say he regretted it afterwards.[55]

Angelo Neumann, director of the opera in Leipzig, had similar views, writing that "Niemann's performance as Siegmund transcended them all," and concluding that Unger "was not enough of a disturbing element to mar the beauty of the whole."[56] Even Wagner, two years later, had to admit that Niemann was successful. On November 7, 1878 Cosima writes in her diaries how Wagner had fondly remembered the performances of Niemann and also the Wotan of the first Bayreuth Festival, Franz Betz: "He recalled Betz and Niemann and felt a desire to write to them, for what they did here was truly extraordinary, he said."[57]

Unger's career as a Heldentenor did not last long. After a series of concerts in London the following year, Unger was no longer used by Wagner, and the tenor retired in 1881. (Heinrich Vogl, never Wagner's favorite, would assume the role of Siegfried in subsequent *Ring* cycles performed in Berlin and London.) Niemann, however, would have continued success in Berlin, even though Wagner would not use him for *Parsifal*, which premiered at Bayreuth in 1882. As always, Wagner was concerned about the visual aspect of the production and he therefore wanted a tenor who was younger than the then fifty-one year-old Niemann. Wagner eventually used three tenors for the performances: Hermann Winkelmann, Heinrich Gudehus, and Ferdinand Jäger. At this time, Wagner was still not satisfied with the tenors available. In a letter to King Ludwig

[55] *Bayreuth: The Early Years*, ed. Robert Hartford: 68.
[56] Ibid.: 71.
[57] *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 2: 192.

II written in March of 1882, Wagner states that tenors "people are all pitiable – they have a bit of voice, they are monstrously overpaid, and they are utterly talentless, lazy and vain."[58]

Niemann would continue to be the most prominent Heldentenor, eventually singing in New York, at the Metropolitan Opera. Between 1885 and 1891, the Metropolitan had six German seasons in which every opera, even *Aida*, was sung in German. 280 of the 490 performances during those seasons were of Wagner's works. During the 1886-87 and 1887-88 seasons, Niemann was the company's principal tenor, singing Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Siegmund, the *Götterdämmerung* Siegfried, and Tristan. His debut came on November 10, 1886, in *Die Walküre*. Henry Krehbiel, the supposed "dean of New York critics" reviewed the performance for the New York *Tribune*:

> He takes possession of the stage like an elemental force... His attitude and gestures all seem parts of Wagner's creation. . . Herr Niemann's treatment of Wagner's musical and literary text. . . is, like the drama itself, and exposition of the German esthetic ideal: strength before beauty. It puts truthful declamation before beautiful tone production in his singing and lifts dramatic color above what is generally considered essential musical color. That from this a new beauty results all those can testify who hear Herr Niemann sing the love song in the first act of *Die Walküre*, which had previously in America been presented only as a lyrical effusion and given with more of less sweetness and sentimentality... The dramatic effect attained by his use of tone color and his marvelous distinctness of enunciation all can feel.[59]

[58] Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4: 635.
[59] Joseph Horowitz, "Coming to America: How the First *Ring* Transfixed U.S. Audiences," *Opera News*, vol. 54, no. 14 (March 27, 1993): 17.

Again, Niemann's acting is praised first. In fact, Krehbiel tells his readers that Niemann's voice is not beautiful, but powerful. This review of Niemann's performance is typical, particular in his later years, when his vocal abilities were diminished. Longtime New York critic William James Henderson writes that Niemann's success relied solely on his dramatic abilities: "Albert Niemann's Tristan was marvelous, but its marvel lay chiefly in the triumph of the man's dramatic power over his native inability to deliver Wagner's text to the public as Wagner wrote it. . . We saw him act, and gathered as much of the music as we could from the orchestra."[60]

Since most of the reviews concerning Niemann's performances focus on his acting, it is difficult to understand what type of voice he had. As stated earlier, Hans von Bülow thought Niemann's voice was that of a baritone. Richard Sternfeld, Niemann's biographer, was of the same opinion:

> Of an even beauty [of voice] one could scarcely speak; the cantilena was often choppy and short-breathed; the vocalization not always noble; the tones produced not freely, but rather hampered by nasality. This made itself felt, however, only in later years, when the high notes also did not appear to be effortless. In his best years his voice was a splendid Heldentenor with baritonal coloring. Niemann was no knight of the high C, though he possessed a powerful middle register; he was not resplendent with sweet falsetto tones, though he knew how to skillfully link the registers. In addition [he had] powerful strength and clarity of articulation, at the time were still a rarity.[61]

[60] W. J. Henderson, *The Art of Singing* (New York: Dial Press, 1938 [repr. New York: Da Capo, 1978]): 178.

[61] "Von einer gleichmässigen Schönheit konnte dann kaum die Rede sein; die Kantilene war oft zerhackt und kurzatmig; die Vokalisation nicht immer edel; die Töne drangen nicht frei, sondern nasal gehemmt hervor. Dies machte sich aber doch erst in späteren Jahren geltend, wo dann auch die Höhe nicht mühelos ansprach. In seinen besten Jahren war das Organ ein prachtvoller Heldentenor mit baritonaler Färbung.

Niemann was clearly no Tichatschek in terms of vocal ability and beauty. If his singing was short-breathed and choppy, it could certainly not be termed bel canto singing. His powerful middle register and the strength of declamation would probably make him the forerunner of the modern, baritonal Heldentenor. Though his voice is described as being like a baritone's, it is hard to imagine that his voice was as robust and dark as Lauritz Melchior's. No matter the exact color of his voice, it was Niemann's acting ability which brought him great success.

The Perfect Heldentenor?

Of all the Heldentenors discussed in this chapter, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld is clearly the only one with whom Wagner found no fault. Wagner's praise of Schnorr may be due to the fact that he was the first Tristan and, more importantly, the first tenor to show an understanding of what Wagner was trying to accomplish in his works. Schnorr's early death, robbing Wagner of future collaboration, may also have amplified Wagner's praise; those who die young are often remembered in terms of what they could have done rather than what they actually did. Wagner remembered Schnorr in this manner.

Even with all of his praise of Schnorr, Wagner still acknowledged that Tichatschek had the more exceptional voice, and though Wagner overlooked Schnorr's

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Niemann war kein Ritter vom hohen C, dafür aber besass er eine kräftige Mittellage; er prunkte nicht mit süsslichen Falsettönen, wusste aber sehr geschickt die Register zu verbinden. Dazu die gewaltige Stärke und die Deutlichkeit der Aussprache, damals noch eine Seltenheit." Sternfeld, *Albert Niemann*: 76 (my translation).

obesity, one can imagine that he would rather have had a tenor of Schnorr's caliber housed in the body of Niemann. Though Niemann was surely the least accomplished vocalist of this trio, he was a compelling actor. Each of these three tenors possessed unique strengths.

If Wagner were able to create the ideal Heldentenor out of these singers' attributes, he would probably take the vocal abilities of Tichatschek, the artistic expression and intellectual capacity of Schnorr, and the physique and acting of Niemann. Each of these tenors, of course, also had shortcomings: Tichatschek lacked the intellect and the dramatic abilities of the other two; Schnorr did not have the ideal physique; and Niemann was hampered not only by vocal inconsistencies but also by his pride and vanity.

One can see – should the above premise be accepted – that Wagner's ideal Heldentenor voice was not with a baritone-like timbre, but one that was grounded in bel canto technique or, at the very least, a healthy technique. One can also see that Wagner wanted an intelligent artist, not a tenor whose pride refused further coaching. He wanted his actor-singers to take a fresh look at each role and perform it on its own terms, not in a manner imbued with stock gestures and operatic clichés. He also wanted a fine actor in terms of appearance and also gestures and demeanor. It was important for him that a Siegfried or Parsifal should look young and that his heroes should have heroic, attractive appearances. Perhaps the combination of these attributes is unreasonable. Perhaps Wagner's expectations were far too high. What is certain is that the world has yet to experience a perfect Heldentenor and it most likely never will.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

William James Henderson, a venerable music critic who wrote for the *New York Times* and the *New York Sun* and was fortunate enough to witness performances by Albert Niemann, Jean de Reszke, and Lauritz Melchior, recognized that which Wagner desired from his performers: "It was necessary only that the singer should sing the notes precisely as they were written, without any liberties, and the text should be clearly and poetically enunciated."[1] He believed, quite rightly, that the rules of singing that applied to Italian bel canto operas could be applied to Wagner's music as well: "Singing is a very important part of the opera, even of the Wagnerian music drama. 'Nothung! Nothung! neidliches Schwert' can be sung strictly in tune and with the aid of all the resources of the most perfect vocal method, without the sacrifice of one shade of its magnificent dramatic power."[2] If one accepts that Henderson's observations are true, then one must also accept that the myths concerning Heldentenors are somehow incomplete, if not incorrect.

Reexamining the Myths

The first Heldentenor myth, as presented in Chapter One, was that Heldentenor roles are "unsingable" or anti-vocal. The analysis of these roles offered in Chapter Three reveals that the greatest concern for a tenor when singing a Wagner opera should be the sheer length of the role itself. While Heldentenor roles are not necessarily easy to sing, every other aspect of them is not radically different from other tenor roles. Other tenor

[1] Henderson, *The Art of Singing*: 168.
[2] Ibid.: 177.

roles have similar vocal range, though they are usually a minor or major second higher than their Heldentenor roles; other tenor roles are accompanied by similar-sized orchestras, even if those orchestras are not given the prominent role as Wagner gives his own orchestras; and other tenor roles require their singers to perform both declamatory and sustained vocal lines. Yet no other tenor roles are comparable to Heldentenor roles in terms of length.

Heldentenor roles can be double the length of other tenor roles. Tristan is twice as long as Otello, one of the longest roles of the Italian repertory, and even French Grand Opera tenor roles are not as long as Heldentenor roles, although the total length of these operas is similar to Wagner's works. The longest Wagnerian tenor roles are Tristan, Siegfried, and Lohengrin, not to mention the infrequently performed Rienzi, yet even Tannhäuser, Walther, and the *Götterdämmerung* Siegfried are longer than almost any other tenor role. When critics mention the difficulty of these roles, they should first note the length: the amount of time that the singer has to sing.

Of course, the difficulty of these roles lies not just in total length, but also in pacing. A tenor might be able to sing thirty or forty minutes of music over the course of an evening, yet he may not be able to sing twenty or twenty-five minutes of music in the course of an act that lasts seventy or eighty minutes. The singer performing Siegmund must do that in Act I, the singer performing Lohengrin must do that in Act III, and the singer performing Tristan must do that in both Act II and Act III. When a tenor performing one of these roles struggles or even fails, it is probably because of a lack of stamina. Many singers simply do not have the vocal strength to sing each part of a

Heldentenor role well. In order to survive, singers often resort to picking spots in which they will sing with full strength and choosing other passages in which they will save their voice.

The other factors that supposedly make these roles impossible to sing are the large Wagnerian orchestra and the alleged lack of melodiousness in the vocal line. Some critics make it seem as if the Heldentenor must scream over an orchestra that is constantly producing torrents of sound. The truth, however, is that Wagner was often careful not to overpower his singers. He used the full forces of the orchestra only when his singers were at rest, with the exception of some brief, dramatic moments. Though a Heldentenor probably must sing over a louder orchestra than a lyric tenor must do, this task is not unreasonable. (The Heldentenor could also be aided by a sensitive conductor, who would do well to keep the volume of the orchestra in check.)

The supposed lack of melody in the Heldentenor's vocal lines is also more myth than truth. Most of the Heldentenor roles feature music that is very melodious. Henderson points out that even the most difficult Heldentenor roles are tuneful and can be sung well: "In 'Tristan und Isolde,' the drama in which the worst offenses are committed by singers, the music is purely melodious, and therefore to be governed by the rules of style applicable to that of 'Lohengrin.'"[3] The only exceptions are both Siegfried roles and Parsifal, in which the Heldentenor must perform a great deal of declamatory music, though these roles also have their memorable melodies.

[3] Ibid.: 169.

Henry Pleasants, another astute observer of singers, points out that it was not Wagner's intention to create roles that were detrimental to voices:

> Wagner never looked upon his own music as anti-vocal. . . He treasured the rounded tone, the sustained vocal line, as much as anyone. But, alone among the German composers, he understood the musical physiognomy, so to speak, of the German language. He recognized the impropriety of German texts set to a pattern of recitative and aria based on Italian or French models. The result, he saw, was only slightly less abominable than French or Italian operas translated into German.[4]

It should be remembered that Wagner did not wish to invent impossible opera roles. He did not want to create "unsingable" roles. He simply wanted to create a type of opera that was more suitable to what he perceived to be the abilities of German singers. Pleasants summarizes Wagner's aims rather simply: "He knew that the German language required an indigenous declamatory and melodic idiom."[5]

Many critics also refer to Heldentenor roles as "voice-killing" ones, suggesting that if a singer performs these roles, he will ruin his voice and shorten his career. The long careers of both Joseph Tichatschek and Albert Niemann , who sang these roles for approximately thirty years each, prove that line of thinking to be false. One must also remember that Lauritz Melchior sang Heldentenor roles for over thirty years, and other twentieth-century Heldentenors such as James King and Jon Vickers performed these roles for over twenty years. These critics would be wise to state that it is not Wagner, but rather bad technique, that ruins voices.

[4] Pleasants, *The Great Singers*: 227.
[5] Ibid.: 227.

The second myth presented in these pages, that the Heldentenor is really a baritone/tenor, also does not appear to be true after more in-depth analysis. Though Heldentenor roles have slightly lower vocal ranges than other tenor roles, most of the Wagnerian tenor roles require only a few low notes. Only Siegmund could be considered a baritone/tenor role, he sings c (below middle c), c-sharp, d often and sings above (high) g′ only once. Yet Siegmund sings g′ too many times for this role to be comfortable for baritones. It would be more accurate if critics would note that a Heldentenor need not possess a strong c′′, but instead a strong c or c-sharp. The public would have a more accurate perception of Heldentenor singing if critics were to admit that they prefer voices that possess a dark, baritone-like timbre, although this attribute is not necessary for Heldentenor singing and was not one that Wagner demanded of his tenors.

The third myth, which states that Heldentenors are extremely rare, raises questions which are not so easily answered. Certainly, there is a perennial need for capable Heldentenors, those who have the ability to sing each note in Wagner's scores well and the stamina to sing an entire Wagnerian role without sacrificing quality. This need is nothing new; Wagner had difficulty in finding tenors and even Tichatschek and Niemann did not completely satisfy him. Perhaps he would be been dissatisfied with the current crop of Heldentenors as well.

Knowing that Heldentenors are rare, however, does not tell us why they are rare. It is possible that Wagner simply demanded too much from his tenors, particularly in terms of stamina. Another reason for lack of Heldentenors could be that there has never been a proven method for training singers to perform Heldentenor roles. Instead of

perpetuating the myths about Heldentenors, it would be better for those who teach singing and those who write about music to seek a way to encourage the study of these most difficult roles.

It is quite possible that Heldentenors are rare only because the roles that they sing are misunderstood. Critics are quick to mention the negative aspects of Heldentenor roles, yet they neglect to mention that Heldentenor singing often requires an agile, flexible voice, and they often do not mention the tender, more intimate moments of these roles. Most critics also do not make any distinctions between the various Heldentenor roles, yet each role is different and presents its own challenges. Walther is a much more lyrical role than Siegfried, and Tristan is over twice the length of Parsifal, yet often these roles are considered to be equal. A singer that is equipped to sing Siegmund might not be able to sing Tannhäuser, yet a Heldentenor is expected to sing the majority (if not all) of the Wagnerian tenor roles. Until those who shape public opinion of Heldentenor roles acquire a more thorough understanding of these roles (and of Wagner's artistic intentions), Heldentenors are bound to be rare: potential Heldentenors will become discouraged by the myths and will likely sing other operatic repertory.

The future of Wagnerian performance depends upon Heldentenors and hopefully there will be singers courageous and capable enough to perform those roles. These singers need teachers who can prepare them for the challenges of Wagner, yet many teachers do not wish to have their students sing Wagner, for fear that it will somehow damage their voices. Those students will only do harm to their voices if they have a poor

technique. They must somehow learn a sound technique and apply it to Wagnerian performance. One can see how this is a frustrating state of affairs.

Unfortunately, a proven method for training Heldentenors does not yet exist. Perhaps it is not too late to establish such a method and to create a school for the training of Wagnerian singers. Wagner had always wanted to create that type of institution, for he realized that if capable performances of his works were to be given, singers would need to be properly prepared. He believed that singers should focus on his works (much like Lauritz Melchior did in his career) and he knew how much attention vocal education requires: "For certain, no branch of study requires so assiduous a personal attention, as that of singing. To obtain a really faultless production of the human voice, particularly in Germany and under influence of the German tongue, demands incessant supervision of the smallest details."[6]

[6] Wagner, "A Music-School for Munich," *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, 4: 207.

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Vita

Brian James Watson was born in Beverly, Massachusetts to Jeff and Ginger Watson of Wenham. After graduating from Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School in 1994, Brian attended Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. In 1998 he graduated cum laude from that institution with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music. That year Brian came to the University of Texas at Austin, where he received a Master of Music degree in Voice Performance in 2000. In the fall of 2001, he commenced the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Voice Performance at the University of Texas.

Permanent address: 104 Maple Street, Wenham, Massachusetts 01984

This treatise was typed by the author.